

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND WORKS, HOUSING STOCKS, MAINTENANCE

Grievance

MR R.N. SWEETMAN (Ningaloo) [9.25 am]: If, in a seven-minute grievance, the member for Swan Hills can get confirmation that a high school will be built, I am sure that my request of the minister, which is a lot more modest, is achievable in the short term, if not immediately.

Mr F.M. Logan interjected.

Mr R.N. SWEETMAN: My grievance is about public housing stocks. I assume I should address it to the member for Cockburn as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Housing and Works.

Ms A.J. MacTiernan: No; it should be addressed to me.

Mr R.N. SWEETMAN: Oh, goody! I am sorry it is not the member for Cockburn. However, I am sure he will listen intently to what I have to say because he probably has similar problems in his area.

The minister may recall that previously in this Parliament I referred primarily to maintenance of public housing stocks, now under the control of the Department of Housing and Works. When I was researching this issue I wanted to be certain that the people whom I contacted in the various shires of my electorate understood that I was linking my grievance this morning primarily to maintenance issues of public housing. We could talk about the staff, but it is not my intention in any way to suggest to the Parliament that the staff of the Department of Housing and Works, the previous Ministry of Housing, or particularly Homeswest, are in any way negligent. They do an unbelievable job. On many occasions their task is as difficult and at least as thankless as mine as a member of Parliament. They do a great job in managing the great variety of issues they deal with daily.

I have suggested before in estimates committees and previously in this Parliament that there is not sufficient allocation in the maintenance budget for the Department of Housing and Works to maintain all of its housing stock.

There is only so much information, particularly in opposition, that one can get from departments. However, I am comforted by the knowledge that the department believes it has a budget to maintain its housing stock in reasonable order. Of course, that is a subjective view. People in the community are saying that they maintain their homes to a certain standard while Homeswest houses on either side of them are being poorly maintained. They are delinquent tenants in most cases, but we will leave the tenants to one side; I am talking about the way the stocks are managed. In most cases, people in private residences can see the value of their properties diminishing as a result of public housing on either side of them not being adequately maintained. That is a pity.

The department gets caught in a bind. There are several categories of maintenance: vacated maintenance, emergency-type maintenance, maintenance for damage and things like that and annual maintenance, such as repaints and after property inspections. In my experience, basic maintenance such as repaints rarely occurs. Many people have come to my office and said, "Rod, can you come and look at my property? This is a basic maintenance issue. I have been at the department for three years and I cannot get my house painted". When I raise that with the department, its normal response is that that work is scheduled in the next budget. I am making the assumption - without the department volunteering this information to me - that to an extent the department is robbing Peter to pay Paul. If the department has only so much in the kitty for vacated maintenance, emergency repairs or whatever, and that money is fully expended, I cannot help but think that it would dip into the normal operating or annual maintenance budget to bridge the gap and take care of the shorter-term maintenance.

This is public housing that we are talking about. I do not believe the cost to the State of this public housing is being adequately assessed. For example, about 47 or 48 houses in Carnarvon are listed under the renewal program. It is intended that those housing stocks will be sold to the private sector, either as they are, or they will be upgraded slightly or have whatever work is required done on them, and the proceeds will be used to build other houses in Carnarvon or elsewhere in the State. However, because those houses have been earmarked for sale, many of the tenancies have been terminated and the tenants have left town or moved to other housing, so the houses are vacant, and in many cases vandalism has taken over. I cannot help but think that the State is forgoing a lot of revenue in leaving those houses in that condition. I do not know whether the minister is aware of this situation. I understand the minister is going to Carnarvon within the next week or so -

Ms A.J. MacTiernan: As you know, I am a frequent visitor to that fantastic town.

Mr R.N. SWEETMAN: Yes. The minister can represent me at the races this weekend, because unfortunately I cannot be there. I regret that I will not be there to give the minister the benefit of my knowledge and tipping expertise.

Ms A.J. MacTiernan: We normally go together!

Mr R.N. SWEETMAN: Yes, we normally do, and we have a wow of a time, and people are greatly amused at that. However, the minister is diverting me from a very important subject. I think the minister would do well to meet with someone like Chris Hall from the Gascoyne Population Health Unit. Chris has been a real advocate of our community for a long time. He was involved in the Carnarvon drug action and education group, COMPARI, or Community Mobilisation for the Prevention of Alcohol Related Injury, and did some fantastic work there. He has been intimately involved in the crafting and maintenance of liquor accords around town, and he is now involved in men's health issues. He spends a lot of time in the community looking at what is going on. The issue of public housing has been of great concern to him, and he is regularly relaying information to me, and I understand that he is talking equally as often to the office of Hon Tom Stephens, to ensure the local members of Parliament are made aware of the dilapidated state of public housing in Carnarvon.

A great deal of vandalism is taking place in the public housing stocks, particularly vacant public housing, around Carnarvon from gangs of youths using gings, rocks and things like that. Over the previous long weekend 129 panes of glass were broken at Carnarvon Senior High School and Carnarvon Primary School. It cost the department about \$22 000 to replace that glass. It is easy to understand why, when buildings are left vacant for some time, vandalism sets in. I hope the minister will be able to attend to this problem and get a further briefing on it when she visits Carnarvon in the next week or so.

MS A.J. MacTIERNAN (Armadale - Minister for Planning and Infrastructure) [9.33 am]: I thank the member for Ningaloo for his grievance. Of course there are very real problems with public housing. Many of the tenants who are accommodated in public housing are, I guess, some of the most disadvantaged people in the State, and that often causes problems for adjoining residents. I would see this problem in my electorate probably far more than would the member for Cockburn. I probably have more public housing in my electorate than the member has in his. It is a very real problem, and, as the member would know, there is no easy solution. However, as a person who spent the first 18 years of her life in public housing, I must make the point that there needs to be some expectation by tenants in public housing that they will take some responsibility for their own home, just as people in private accommodation do. I believe that in some respects public housing tenants have an over-dependence on the State for often very minor matters. I am a strong advocate of public housing, but I believe we need to encourage the people who live in that type of accommodation to develop a sense of independence. I say that with some confidence on the basis of my personal experience.

This Government has recognised the problems and has been prepared to do something about them. We have, for the first time, given a major boost to the maintenance of public housing with the allocation of an extra \$5 million in the 2003-04 budget. That is continuing into the forward estimates, so that will be an extra \$5 million a year for the maintenance of public housing. I have the figures for the three principal centres in the member's area - Carnarvon, Denham and Exmouth. I actually have all the figures, and I will set them out, because the member has indicated that he would like some data. The member has a total of 687 public housing properties in his electorate: 397 in Carnarvon, 92 in Exmouth, 21 in Denham, 88 in Meekatharra, 25 in Mt Magnet, two in Yalgoo and 62 in Newman. The maintenance budget for 2003-04, which is above the state average, is \$2.2 million, and it will be continuing at that level in the next financial year. That is just for maintenance.

Mr R.N. Sweetman: Can you talk about the sequence?

Ms A.J. MacTIERNAN: Yes. I will give a few figures that I think the member will find interesting. That equates to over \$3 200 per property - well above the state average, and more than the private sector would spend on such properties - so it is a substantial allocation. The member has indicated his concern that there is movement between the buckets. There is a very structured budget for expenditure. There is no evidence whatsoever that the department is moving between the buckets. The figures I will give now are specifically for Carnarvon, Denham and Exmouth. Day-to-day maintenance was \$489 872; vacated maintenance was \$174 000; improvements were \$104 000 - that is improvements particularly to provide increased amenity levels, with an emphasis on kitchen and bathroom upgrades; planned maintenance, which is, I think, one of the things the member was talking about, was \$162 998; New Living refurbishment expenditure was \$395 000; and programmed maintenance was \$45 000. Recently a further \$42 000 was allocated to Exmouth specifically to replace floor coverings at 10 dwellings. A further \$35 000 was allocated to Denham to address internal painting to seven dwellings, and \$45 000 was allocated to address internal painting requirements at pensioner units located at Foss Crescent and Gooch Street. External painting projects, such as full external paint to a complex at Hearn Place and 10 houses in South Carnarvon, has been undertaken, with some work still in progress, at a total cost of \$45 500. The New Living program has, as the member knows, been under way in South Carnarvon. That has reduced the ratio of public housing in that area, which was at an unacceptably high level of 37 per cent. That is now down to about 20 to 25 per cent. The condition of housing stock is variable, and we are going through a program of replacing some of the more problematic stock. Seventy-five properties in the mid west and Gascoyne regions have been targeted for this program, which involves the total replacement of housing. That is another program, and is over and above maintenance.

Mr R.N. Sweetman: You are selling the houses and building new ones.

Ms A.J. MacTIERNAN: That is right.

Mr R.N. Sweetman: You are replacing 75.

Ms A.J. MacTIERNAN: That is right. That program began in 1996 under the previous Government, but has been accelerated by us. From the 2004-05 financial year it will be applied to around 200 units per annum across the State. There has been a definite focus on the mid west and Gascoyne to deal with problems in those areas. An extra \$5 million has gone into this program. The first big fillip that has been given to the maintenance of Homeswest housing has come this year and will continue for the life of this Government.