

FREMANTLE WARDERS' COTTAGES

Grievance

MS S.F. MCGURK (Fremantle) [9.37 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Housing in relation to the state of the heritage-listed former prison warders' cottages in Henderson Street, Fremantle. It is a little different from what is noted on the business paper, which talks about the wardens' cottages. It is actually the warders' cottages.

These cottages are owned by the Department of Housing and were provided as affordable housing for residents until October 2011, when all those residents were evicted from the properties. At that time the cottages were fenced off and have now become derelict. This is of enormous concern to the Fremantle community, as the cottages, which are in the centre of Fremantle, are a daily reminder of a number of inadequacies of this government. Firstly, the government evicted public tenants and these houses have been left vacant for nearly two years when there are record numbers on public housing waiting lists. Secondly, the cottages have not been maintained. Previous to becoming vacant, the Department of Housing itself said that it only prioritised maintenance for safety and accommodation purposes—that is, they ignored any of the cottages' significant heritage value. Now, because the buildings are not occupied, they have been left to ruin even further and are now completely dilapidated.

These buildings date back to 1851, when the then royal engineer, Edmund Henderson, was given the job of bringing convicts to the colony of Western Australia and accommodating them. He built the first tranche of these cottages without permission from London, because the prison warders and their dependents needed accommodation. Construction continued in three segments until 1857. These cottages are among the state's oldest terraces, and I understand might represent the oldest section of continual terraces in the country. They are integral to the Fremantle Prison, the state's only World Heritage-listed building. In short, these cottages have significant built and social heritage value. However, under this government they have been vacated and become derelict. This is all the more distressing and frustrating for the Fremantle community and, in fact, for so many visitors to Fremantle who walk past the buildings, because they are right in the centre of Fremantle next to the markets. I am sure many members of this house have seen them. While the Fremantle CBD struggles with the changing face of retail and other challenges to keep its inner city economy vibrant, the sight of this neglect of heritage and mismanagement of public housing, while there are tens of thousands on public housing waiting lists, is infuriating to the thousands of people who pass by them every week.

What are the possible solutions to this matter? In an interview with the ABC's 7.30WA program, which recently did a segment on this issue, Kelly Rippingale from the National Trust of Australia said that because of their significant heritage value, it is the trust's preference that the cottages are returned to the prison for joint management with the prison. One of the issues with any solution, which must see the cottages repaired as well as used in some way, is the price tag that has been put on restoring these buildings. I understand that the National Trust has put the cost at around \$6 million. A satisfactory outcome to this issue must involve coming up with the resources to ensure restoration. These are buildings of significant heritage value and they cannot be left in the disrepair that they have been left in to date.

One possible solution to the current state of the warders' cottages is that put by the Fremantle council; that is, that the council lease the cottages from the state government for a peppercorn rent and in return the cottages would be restored and then leased out. Under that plan the City of Fremantle would take any income from the cottages being used. Restoration would need to be done to a reasonable standard, which is always a challenge in the management of buildings of this age. Finally, as the arrangement is displacing public housing, a mandatory component of affordable housing should also be offered by the council as part of any agreement. This affordable housing could be offered in the cottages, or anywhere in the Fremantle central business district.

In late April I attended a public meeting of Fremantle inner-city residents that was convened to discuss this, among other issues. It was well attended and some concern was expressed at that meeting that it was not up to Fremantle ratepayers to pick up the tab, where the Department of Housing and the state government had so obviously failed to maintain and utilise such an important public asset. In response to this view, the mayor said that there would need to be a proper business case so that local ratepayers are not out of pocket with this proposal.

I understand the frustration of observers when they ask why the state government should not be brought to book for not maintaining its assets. It is absolutely the responsibility of successive governments to ensure that these residences are properly maintained and occupied. However, the fact is that there are tens of thousands of people on the public housing waiting lists—around 50 000 as I understand it—so much so that it is barely newsworthy for a family to be living out of their car while they wait for public housing to become available. Just this week in the media we heard some very distressing stories about families not able to find housing, and yesterday we had a large number of speakers in this house wanting to stress the dire state in which residents in their electorates who

need good public housing find themselves. There is an argument that considering the amount that it would take to restore the warders' cottages those millions are better used to provide more and properly maintained housing for people on public waiting lists.

This grievance is timely as this weekend marks the commencement of the Fremantle Heritage Festival, which as its website states

...is an annual celebration of one of the city's best assets—its historic character.

The Fremantle warders' cottages are buildings that should represent this state's commitment to heritage and to ensuring families have access to affordable housing, and could represent inner city diversity and vibrancy. Instead they represent this government's inertia, mismanagement of public housing stock, and failure to provide for families who are in urgent need of housing.

MR W.R. MARMION (Nedlands — Minister for Housing) [9.43 am]: I thank the member for Fremantle for a very good grievance. My family has a lot of heritage in Fremantle, as the member is probably aware, and indeed the City of Fremantle does a wonderful job of looking after its heritage, and the warders' cottages are a good example of that. As the member said, the cottages were built in 1851–57 and they need to be preserved. They are owned by the Department of Housing and—just a bit of background—were obtained by the department in 1992 and used primarily for public housing. In 2010, the Department of Housing determined that the cottages were not suitable for this purpose due to the very high maintenance needs and the lack of adaptability to the universal design principles now set for housing. In 2010, the cottages were approved for disposal by the then Minister for Housing and the tenants were vacated by October 2011. Originally an open-market sale was planned, which became problematic. As the member knows, the cottages are a heritage asset and required a conservation plan to be prepared, and any new private owners would have to abide with the clauses outlined in any of the contracts. Strata title was also considered to enhance sales potential. This also proved challenging but not impossible due to the conflict between building compliance requirements and the limited ability to modify the buildings due to their steep narrow stairways, the doorways and fire safety issues, so there were difficulties in complying with modern building codes. I have seen the current photos and I agree with the member; the cottages are not in very good condition and are a bit of an eyesore. The cottages were offered for sale to the City of Fremantle; however, the city did not wish to proceed, citing the cost of maintenance as an issue.

In June 2011, the Fremantle Prison wrote to the Department of Housing and expressed an interest in possibly purchasing four of the units subject to ministerial and Treasury approval. It is understood by the Department of Housing that the cost would have been an issue for the prison as well. During 2010–11, when the tenants were relocated and the conservation plan was being prepared, a proposal was received from Access Housing to take them on under the asset transfer program, so sales arrangements were halted. However, Access Housing withdrew its proposal in January 2012—so that stalled the process. Another proposal was then received to transfer ownership to the National Trust of Australia for restoration and to lease the cottages to community housing for use as transitional housing. This proposal did not proceed due to uncertainties over Lotterywest funding and the risk of community issues around their proposed use, which I think was for ex-prisoners.

In January 2013, the due diligence report was completed, which was funded by the Department of Housing through a \$50 000 grant and produced by the national trust. The report has been used to inform alternative options and it estimated that the cost to fully restore the 15 cottages was around \$6 million, as the member said.

The cottages are in poor condition and in a prime location, which has led to many inquiries from the public and articles in the local newspapers. It is apparent that the ongoing controversy has split into two camps with the representatives of the Fremantle Inner City Residents Association on one side and the City of Fremantle on the other, which is playing out in the media. Due to the challenging requirements for the sale out of government ownership, and based on the feeling within the Fremantle community, an outcome that would retain the cottages in government ownership is preferred.

The latest proposal being considered by the Department of Housing is for the department to retain ownership of the cottages but provide a peppercorn lease to the city, which will then carry out the restoration works at its own expense. There was discussion that some of the units be used for affordable key worker housing; however, the latest advice from the city is that it would need to borrow the funding and have a commercially sustainable outcome, so it is proposing that the cottages be used for short-stay accommodation. We will see what that study comes up with and, hopefully, there can be some move towards a component of affordable housing.

The city's proposal has the following advantages: the cottages will be extensively repaired at little or no cost to the Department of Housing; the works will commence in the shortest time frame; the Department of Housing will retain the ownership, leaving open the possibility of sale or an alternative outcome in the future; and at worst it will be cost neutral to the city if it is commercially sustainable.

The director general of the Department of Housing and the Mayor of the City of Fremantle met on 6 May to discuss and progress items required for the agreement. The Department of Housing is now in the process of making a formal offer of lease to the City of Fremantle and it is drafting the lease agreements now. It is understood that the City of Fremantle is preparing a full business case, which will require the approval of the council before it can finally agree to the proposal.

The government understands the importance of this vital heritage asset. It is committed to finding a solution that will restore the cottages and also guarantee their future in the community of Fremantle. The government believes that the Department of Housing and the City of Fremantle proposal represents the best possible outcome for the cottages. That is what we will be working strongly to progress.

It is a difficult issue. The member made the comment, with which I agree 100 per cent, that the \$6 million or thereabouts that needs to be invested to restore the cottages could, from the objective of the Department of Housing, best be spent in other types of housing for the market. We need to come up with a solution by working with the City of Fremantle. Its interest is in preserving the heritage of the cottages, and it has done an outstanding job in the past 20 or 30 years.

Ms S.F. McGurk: It just needs to happen, minister.

Mr W.R. MARMION: It does. The member will find that we will be moving very quickly to work on this proposal with the City of Fremantle.