

PUBLIC HOUSING

Motion

MR F.M. LOGAN (Cockburn) [4.01 pm]: I move —

That this house condemns the government for its failures in the housing portfolio, and in particular public housing.

The opposition is referring in this motion to the public housing owned by the Housing Authority, known to everybody in Western Australia as Homeswest. Since the Minister for Housing inherited the portfolio and since Parliament has returned, he has spoken on a number of occasions, either by making a ministerial statement or answering a question without notice, about the success of the “Affordable Housing Strategy 2010–20”. He has highlighted the Department of Housing’s release of key highlights of the strategy from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2012, which can be found on its website. He has talked about how the government has met its targets of 7 600 new or affordable homes against a target of 20 000 by 2020. That is broken down into the types of houses that fall within the definition of social housing and affordable homes as per the government’s housing strategy.

The key set of words in the minister’s media release and the statements made by the minister to the house is “social housing”. Social housing means a very broad range of outcomes under the Barnett government’s 2010–20 housing strategy. It is about affordable housing that may well be purchased, leased or available through community housing groups but there is very little to be said about public housing, as managed by Homeswest and the housing commission, in this media release. The minister has said nothing about Homeswest homes and the success of investment in that sector of housing for the disadvantaged and the unfortunate in Western Australia who, usually through no fault of their own, fall back on having to put their hand up for public housing. This is a very topical issue. We heard the debate this morning on all radio stations about the number of public housing tenants on the waiting list. We have heard about the views of the Salvation Army and the report it released today about the impact of the housing crisis on the very poor in our society.

I wanted to take the house through four specific areas relating to Homeswest. The first is the investment of public housing by the Barnett government, particularly with reference to waiting times, waiting lists and maintenance issues within Homeswest. I will refer to some specific issues from my electorate to highlight the problems associated with Homeswest. I would also like to raise an issue about the future housing stock of the housing commission. I turn to the first issue—public housing investment by the Barnett government, waiting times and waiting lists. As I have said, the Barnett government and its ministers, both the current minister and previous ministers, have been crowing regularly in this house about the success of the affordable housing strategy and the number of new affordable homes. They refer specifically to new social houses for people on very low incomes. As I said, that is a very long bow to draw when it comes to the provision of houses for people with no incomes or very, very low incomes here in Western Australia. It covers a wide range of strategies that have been adopted by the Barnett government.

If we look at the actual specifics and the figures that are provided by the Barnett government through the 2011–12 annual report of the Department of Housing and examine the responsibilities of the government relating to its own housing stock and to its own public housing waiting lists as a part of affordable housing, we see a completely different picture from the one that has been painted by the Minister for Housing. In 2007–08, the total number of people on the public housing waiting list was 16 932. These are figures quoted from the Department of Housing’s 2011–12 Housing Authority annual report. That was the last financial year of the last Labor government in Western Australia. If we fast forward nearly five years later to the number of people on the public housing waiting list in 2011–12, it was 22 871. That is a jump from 16 932 during the last period of the Labor government to 22 871 under the Barnett government. That jump in the number of people on the waiting list has occurred throughout the term of the Liberal–National government in Western Australia. When we look at the number of people who are seeking to rent those 22 871 units from the Department of Housing, we see that over 50 000 people are on the public housing waiting list. It is no wonder that we hear nothing from the Minister for Housing about Homeswest, the public housing waiting list or the housing commission when he talks about the affordable housing strategy.

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: The member for Girrawheen is correct. As I said, the minister has spoken at length about the supposed success of the affordable housing strategy, but he says nothing about the 26 per cent blowout in the number of people on the public housing waiting list since 2007–08. An additional 5 939 people have come onto the waiting list seeking housing from the Barnett government’s public housing organisation. We have heard nothing from the minister about that. We have heard no reference to how the minister is tackling that issue. What

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is very interesting is why that housing waiting list has blown out. The minister will probably try to convince us that it relates to the number of people coming into Western Australia every week or the number of people who have changed their jobs and are now not in the situation they were at the height of the mining boom and are now seeking support from the government for public housing. The minister will try to convince us with a series of excuses why that public housing list has blown out over the five years of the Barnett government. But there are some other figures in the Housing Authority annual report that tell a different story from the one we will hear from the minister about the blowout in public housing waiting lists. Those figures relate to the number of houses that have been built for the housing stock that falls within the remit of the Housing Authority. I will go back to the figures contained in the authority's annual reports for the five-year period from 2007–08, the last financial year of the Labor government in Western Australia, to the 2011–12 financial year under the Liberal–National government. In 2007–08 the total rental stock of the Department of Housing and Works was 35 473. In 2011–12 the Housing Authority's annual report showed 36 749 units, which is an increase of 1 276 units of accommodation over five years; that is, approximately 255 units of accommodation built every year of the Barnett government. That is not exactly a glowing reflection of the success of the affordable housing strategy. The reason that the minister does not mention this when he refers to the affordable housing strategy is that it is not a good look. It is the unspoken truth about the public housing stock in Western Australia. It is in trouble. This minister and this government are not committed to increasing that stock.

I will refer to the public housing rental stock by bedroom number. I would have thought that three-bedroom houses would be sought after by the 22 000 people on the waiting list. I would have thought that bringing as many three-bedroom houses as possible into the public housing stock would be a priority for this government. During the financial years 2007–08 to 2011–12 there has been a decline of 228 three-bedroom homes in the overall public housing stock. It is not as though more houses are being made available; the government has taken houses out of the stock, particularly three-bedroom homes, which is the type of house that many of those families on the 22 000 waiting list would require. The government has reduced the number of three-bedroom homes available to people on the public housing waiting list. If members look at the number of bedsitters held by the authority, which are indispensable for young people to address the issue of youth homelessness, the number available for rental over the five-year period of the Barnett government has been reduced by 67. How does reducing the total number of bedsits available in the housing stock by 67 over its five years in government address the issue of public housing and the massive public housing waiting list? I accept that over the same period 811 two-bedroom units have been added to the public housing stock, and that 423 one-bedroom units have been added to public housing stock. That expansion has primarily come about because apartments have been built by the Housing Authority as a result of commonwealth money that has poured into Western Australia. Nearly \$100 million has come in over the last three years from the commonwealth to provide affordable housing, so Housing Authority rental stock of one and two-bedroom units have increased by over 1 200 because of the number of units that have been built by the Department of Housing, many of which have been sold on or handed over to housing associations and some have been kept for public housing stock.

The Housing Authority's 2011–12 annual report breaks down its rental stock by dwelling type. In 2007–08 the total number of houses in the rental stock was 12 270. In 2011–12 the housing stock of Homeswest was 12 193 houses, so there has been a drop of 77 homes—not duplexes or medium to high-density units, but in homes—over the five-year period of the Barnett government. That is why there are 22 000 applicants on the Homeswest waiting list. It has nothing to do with a sudden upsurge in demand or the mass influx of immigrants to Western Australia from wherever creating a demand for public housing; it is because the Barnett government is not committed to Homeswest and has been reducing the total housing stock over the five years it has been in government, particularly the housing stock for families. Homes for families have been reduced—particularly three-bedroom homes—by 228 over the last five years, and the total housing stock for homes has reduced by 77 over the same period of time. No wonder the waiting list has blown out.

What is the government doing about it? As I said, the minister comes into this place and crows about the affordable housing strategy, the wording of which we have to be very careful about. It refers to “social housing” because it is not talking about public housing, the housing commission or Homeswest. It is talking about a broad range of housing provisions for low-income earners, but it is not talking about Homeswest and the housing commission, which is why this motion is before the house today.

What is it doing about it? Is the Barnett government attempting to address the issue? If we look at the total building commencements within the housing commission in 2007–08—I think it was the member for Midland's last period as the minister—it was 885 in that financial year. If we look at the commencements for the financial year 2011–12—this is from the annual report of the housing commission—it was 557. That is a year-on-year drop over that period of 328. It is not a good look for the Barnett government or public housing.

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If we look at it in terms of land production and the number of lots made available to the housing commission as a result of subdivisions carried out by the Department of Housing in its normal business affairs, we see that in the 2007–08 financial year—the last financial year of the Labor government—the housing commission produced 2 554 lots of land. By the last financial year of the Barnett government, 2011–12, it had dropped to 1 789; a reduction, year-to-year—2007–08 to 2011–12—of 765 lots. So over that period of the Barnett government, we have seen an increase in the public housing waiting list—a massive 25 per cent increase in the number of people waiting for homes—as well as a reduction in the number of family homes; a reduction in the overall housing stock; a reduction in building commencements, particularly for homes; and a significant reduction in the number of lots produced for new housing commission stock. As of last month, the figures provided by the government urban development group—the Housing Industry Forecasting Group, which is an arm of the Department of Planning—highlighted the dwelling commencements as of now. This is not lots produced or starts in the last financial year that I referred to, 2011–12; this is as of April this year. The total number of public housing starts was 284, which is down 27 per cent to December 2012 compared with the same period in 2011. At 284 public sector housing starts, it is a 27 per cent drop over the first part of the 2012–13 financial year, compared with the same period of six months in the previous financial year.

My point is that housing waiting lists have blown out completely under this government. The number of homes held in stock by Homeswest has reduced, the number of building commencements has reduced, the number of lots produced for public housing has reduced, and it continues on. It continues right up until December 2012 and the first six months of the financial period of this current year. It is a shocking indictment on the Barnett government and its handling of public housing in Western Australia.

I turn to the reasons we do not hear too much about this. As I have said, the minister comes into this place and spouts about the affordable housing strategy, but he fails to ever mention anything to do with public housing, Homeswest or the efforts of the housing commission, which is not surprising. Recommendation 26 of the eighth report of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee to the last Parliament in 2011, entitled “A Fading Dream — Affordable Housing in Western Australia”, states —

The Minister for Housing table in Parliament by March 2012 the raw data on the State’s waiting list and waiting times, including all State regions, not just the average figures. This data should also be published on the Department of Housing’s web site every six months.

That was dismissed by the government—not supported: “We are not going to be open and accountable for the waiting list; we are not going to be open and accountable for our handling of Homeswest and the housing commission’s stock.” That is not surprising, because it tells a very sad and dark story of the government’s handling of housing for the poorest and most disadvantaged in Western Australia. It is not surprising that the minister says nothing in this house; it is not surprising that the Barnett government did not support recommendation 26 of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee’s report of 2011.

We could, however, have had a bit of an insight into the minister’s handling of his portfolio had the minister provided to the house information from the Office of Housing and Land Supply, which was announced in 2010. The minister also said that the government was funding the Office of Housing and Land Supply to the tune of \$300 000 per annum, and, in fact, there was an advertisement for staff for the Office of Housing and Land Supply. The only question is: where is the Office of Housing and Land Supply? I sure cannot find it. The minister announced with great fanfare the information this office would provide to the general public, to the house and, in particular, to the market on housing and land supply in Western Australia. I understood it was a joint venture between the Minister for Planning and the Minister for Housing, as announced by the then Minister for Housing in 2010. Where is that office? How many people does it employ? What has it done since 2010? I and other opposition members have looked hard and long for the Office of Housing and Land Supply and we cannot find it. It was announced. We knew it was going to turn up somewhere, but unfortunately we have looked everywhere and we just cannot find it. Maybe people are employed there, but where are they located and what do they do? We just do not know, because we have heard no more about that office since that announcement was made.

I now turn to the issue of Homeswest maintenance. All members who have Homeswest homes in their constituencies have problems with Homeswest maintenance contracts. These problems directly relate to and are a direct consequence of the changes made by the Barnett government to the Department of Housing’s maintenance contracts. The government signed off on a single head contractor model. Under that contracting model, Transfield Services (Australia) Pty Ltd is the head contractor for the metropolitan, great southern, Pilbara and Midwest regions; Program Facility Maintenance Pty Ltd is the head contractor for the south west region; and Lake Maintenance Pty Ltd is the head contractor for the Kimberley, Goldfields and the wheatbelt. Under the

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definition of how the authority delivers its maintenance, the Housing Authority annual report 2011–12 explains at page 34 —

The Authority delivers maintenance services via its 10 regions through a head contractor model, whereby the Authority deals with a small number of contractors who then manage a multitude of subcontractors.

Another word for that model of contracting is pyramid subcontracting. The model the Barnett government has adopted for Homeswest housing maintenance contracts is pyramid subcontracting. At page 35, the annual report refers to the way the quality of work and timeliness of repairs of pyramid subcontracting is measured as follows —

The Authority measures the head contractors' performance via Service Level Agreements. These allow the Authority to identify performance issues on an on-going basis and apply penalties if necessary.

So the Homeswest model of maintenance is based on pyramid subcontracting. The housing authority, Homeswest, only measures the performance of the head contractor. It does not drill down to the subcontractors, and the other subcontractors under the principal head contractor, to check the quality of work, the timeliness of delivery, the responsiveness of those contractors to contracts or orders that have been given by Homeswest and the head contractor. More importantly, it does not drill down to see whether the costs of doing the maintenance work issued by the head contractor is true value for money and directly relates to the true cost of the maintenance being done. The department admits that it is not checked because the only thing that is checked is the performance of the head contractor, not the subcontractors under the head contractor, and not the sub-subcontractors under them. Their performance, quality, timeliness and cost structures are not checked; only the performance of the head contractor is checked. It is not surprising that members from both sides of the house have so many complaints about Homeswest maintenance contracts because the head contractor model that the Barnett government opted for is a sham. It is based on sham contracting—pyramid subcontracting. No wonder they cannot keep control of the quality and the timeliness of the maintenance orders issued by Homeswest and in response to the complaints by tenants.

I would like to hear from my colleagues about the nature of those complaints. I am sure they have many complaints. In reference to the third issue, I have many complaints. In this year alone these are some of the Homeswest issues that my office has dealt with: antisocial behaviour, garden maintenance, maintenance, neighbours causing problems to neighbours; replacement of gas cookers, security, priority assistance, homelessness, home security, leaking roof, gas hot water systems broken and broken tiling. A number of those are for people with disabilities. They are just a few of the Homeswest matters that have been forwarded to my office this year and show what they have been dealing with on a day-to-day basis. They are the complaints we receive from our constituents about the poor performance of Homeswest.

A number of those complaints, and a number of complaints that are not on the list but I am still dealing with because they drag on forever, relate to antisocial behaviour. The member for Midland has raised the issue of the inability of Homeswest and the government to deal with the antisocial behaviour of Homeswest tenants. The member for Midland was quite vocal in her complaints about the Minister for Housing's inability to come to grips with the issue, despite the three-strikes antisocial behaviour policy and the changes that have been made to the Residential Tenancies Act, given that they are not yet in place. The statistics on disruptive behaviour that have been provided by the Department of Housing illuminate why the member for Midland feels so frustrated that nothing has been done. Page 39 of the Department of Housing's annual report on its success in dealing with disruptive behaviour shows that in 2011–12, the department received 12 988 disruptive behaviour complaints. The department issued 906 first strikes, 382 second strikes and 110 third strikes out of 12 988 complaints. It is therefore not surprising that the member for Midland still has problems in her electorate, because those problems are not being resolved.

The minister stood in this house and said that he received many complaints from members of Parliament about the behaviour of some Homeswest tenants. Therefore he knows the lengths that someone has to go to encourage the Department of Housing to move those tenants out of their Homeswest homes. Sometimes those tenants are more than disruptive; they are violent and threatening. The length people have to go is reflected in the number of third strikes issued—110 out of the 12 988 complaints. Sometimes it is virtually impossible to move people on, particularly those who are running drug houses, despite all the evidence that is provided to the Department of Housing by the police. The same can be said for those who are violent to their neighbours and whose antisocial behaviour is absolutely uncontrollable in and around their home. The minister seems to be unable to come to grips with that issue. The Barnett government has talked long, hard and tough about disruptive behaviour but the figures that it provides show that it is weak in action; it is not doing the right thing. The government will hear more from other members of Parliament about that.

The fourth and final issue I wish to discuss is the future housing stock. As I indicated, the number of housing starts as of December 2012 was down 27 per cent on the previous financial year. As I have highlighted to the house, the actual housing stock, particularly homes, is being reduced by this minister and this government. That reflects one clear message: the Barnett government is not committed to public housing. The Barnett government is trying to move on from public housing, which is the whole point of the affordable housing strategy. The wording of the affordable housing strategy reflects the philosophical approach by the Liberal–National government to public housing. The government would like to see public housing wound back in Western Australia. That is the real truth about the Barnett government. It would like to see public housing wound back and the community housing sector taking on more of the public housing stock. The government would like to see more people using Keystart and moving on from the public housing sector, and that is not a problem. As a Labor government and as a Labor opposition, we support encouraging people into home ownership. Nevertheless, a very large number of people in Western Australia rely on public housing and will continue to rely on public housing. We have a waiting list of more than 22 000 people, which is up 25 per cent since the member for Midland was the Minister for Housing and Works. That situation has been created by the Barnett government but what is being done to address it? Nothing. We are actually going backwards as this minister and this government concentrate on what they believe is affordable housing. That is not good enough. Tell those 22 000 people who are on the waiting list that that is what the government is up to. Be honest about it. The government is not committed to public housing. Those people will be on the waiting list for a long, long time. If the government is to be honest, it should tell the people on the waiting list to get a private rental, apply for a lease through community housing or apply for a loan from Keystart, because this government has failed miserably in the provision of public housing in Western Australia and it is not committed to its future.

MRS M.H. ROBERTS (Midland) [4.47 pm]: I commend the member for Cockburn for moving this motion today to condemn this government for its failures in the housing portfolio, and for its failures in the provision of public housing in particular. The member for Cockburn has effectively outlined a range of fronts on which the government has failed in the housing portfolio. I urge the current Minister for Housing, the member for Nedlands, to not take this debate too personally because he has not been solely responsible for the state we are in. The largest part of the responsibility for the mess that the housing portfolio is in, and in particular for the state of public housing within that portfolio, is none other than the member for Vasse, the current Treasurer. He has no empathy with ordinary people and he has a philosophy of contracting out.

My colleagues have time and again raised the issue of maintenance in Department of Housing houses. This is about not taking responsibility and pushing the constituents at arm's length. Once upon a time Homeswest used to handle its own issues in-house and it was the minister's department that dealt with the maintenance issues, so when there was failure or neglect, the minister was much more responsible, whereas now it is being contracted out. We are supposed to believe that this is cheaper. How can it be cheaper to pay a third party to do it? Basically, the company doing it has to make a profit. The only way the maintenance can be made cheaper by contracting out is either by paying the staff less than the government rate—I am not sure whether that is the case but my colleagues will no doubt have an opinion on that—or by not doing the work or not doing it to an appropriate standard and letting the maintenance list blow out. A lot of my constituents have almost given up complaining about maintenance issues because the contractors never get around to it. The tenants wait months and months to get problems sorted. I have heard that it takes ages to get attention to fix leaking taps, for example. Sometimes people do not see me until they are totally at their wit's end on those types of matters. I certainly raised housing issues about lack of maintenance and failures in maintenance in relation to some units in the corner block right next door to my office in The Crescent, Midland.

The member for Cockburn has also talked about the waiting list. This is largely a responsibility of the former Minister for Housing, the member for Vasse and current Treasurer. Likewise, the disruptive behaviour policy lands fairly squarely at his feet. The current Minister for Housing has inherited a mess. I have a lot of sympathy for him. It is a tough portfolio in tough circumstances; circumstances in which people have seen the cost of living and the cost of rent go up dramatically. People are struggling to make ends meet. Never before has it been more important to have an effective handling of the public housing portfolio, yet we have seen a complete failure by this government. I will get to the waiting list shortly. I will now go through a few case studies. Seriously, we would have to stay here all day and all night for the next few weeks for me to go through all the housing issues in my electorate, and that would just be the public housing issues.

This has become the most significant issue in my electorate. It is the one issue most constituents talk to me about. It is at an all-time high. Members will know that I have been in this place for a long time. I have been the member for Midland for the past 16 years and I have never ever seen the public housing situation in a worse state. Although the incumbent government might like to turn and blame the former government for it—without doubt we were not perfect—I can say that we started a range of new strategies. For the housing portfolio, I got

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the first and only, and biggest, increase in expenditure in decades so that we could get more houses. This government was the beneficiary of a significant amount of commonwealth money for public housing in its first year in office. Some of what it takes credit for is funding provided by the federal Labor government. Without that, its record is one of cuts when it comes to public housing. Given the shortness of time, I need to get on to some of these issues.

I will start with disruptive behaviour. Sadly, the current minister has been misled. He was asked a dorothy dixer yesterday about what a success this government had been in dealing with disruptive tenants. When people in my electorate find out that the government considers itself a success in dealing with disruptive tenants, they will be flabbergasted. I expect, given the nature of the Acting Speaker's (Mr P. Abetz) electorate, he might be aware of some of these problems too. The Minister for Housing told the house yesterday —

As members know, I frequently get letters from them raising concerns about disruptive behaviour in their electorates.

Yes, the minister has that right—he frequently gets letters from us about that. He said it is a very important issue—that is right too. He then said —

In 2011 the government strengthened and streamlined the disruptive behaviour management strategy.

No, it did not—it is worse than ever. This government did not strengthen it and it did not streamline it. It is just words and inaction; it is not working. The minister went on to say —

Under the improved policy, sanctions against tenants are now applied based on the severity and frequency of proven disturbances.

Firstly, that has always been the case. There is really no change there. That is what the department and minister after minister have all claimed. It was nothing more than a bit of window-dressing by the member for Vasse when he was Minister for Housing to say that he was doing something new. It sounded good; delivered nothing. The minister said yesterday —

These include dangerous behaviour, such as assault, arson and the manufacture of drugs, for which strikes are not issued but immediate action is taken to terminate the tenancy. For serious behaviour, such as aggressive or threatening acts or vandalism of a neighbour's property, the tenant will get a first and final warning for the first incident ...

That will come as big news to many of my constituents. I call upon the Minister for Housing to implement that policy and to get out of his ivory tower to meet my constituents in Gelderland Entrance in Stratton. Come out and talk to my constituents. Sadly, I have to tell the minister that I have received complaints about disruptive behaviour from tenants in this one house from most of the people living in Gelderland Entrance and the surrounding streets of Stratton—it does not stop there—and into the suburb of Jane Brook next door. The complaints have not just come from the next-door neighbours or from the people across the road, who frankly tell me that they live in fear and terror—I do not exaggerate one little bit—they believe that the tenants in that house are criminals and they have reason to believe that. They are aware of police attendances at that house. I have had some arguments, by written exchanges with the minister, the agency and the director general, during the caretaker period, as to the number of instances. I was told a lesser number by the department, but the local senior sergeant gave me a totally different figure. We asked, "Any possibility of you speaking to Homeswest directly?" The police were quite obliging and did that. I have a lot of cases, but I want to go through this one in detail because it is a case study. Frankly, there is no single tenancy in my electorate that causes a greater problem to the community than this one. It is only about a week or so ago since the minister last replied to me on this issue, again dismissing it. This Minister for Housing is not the first Minister for Housing to respond on this same issue.

I will start in about June 2012, nearly a year ago. The letter is addressed to Hon Troy Buswell, MLA, Minister for Housing. I wrote —

Dear Minister

Disruptive Behaviour ...

I will not say the actual house number —

Gederland Entrance Stratton

I am writing to you with regard to alleged anti-social behaviour that appears to be emanating from the Homeswest residence at the above address.

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My office has received complaints from residence living close by stating that they have constantly been dealing with abuse and criminal activity including at one point catching one of the residents from the house breaking into their vehicle.

There we are—a criminal act against a neighbour. My letter continues —

In the past weeks there was an incident where two youths who had been seen jumping a fence with allegedly stolen goods were followed back to this home. What followed soon after was a vehicle that is always at that home tried to avoid police and sped off nearly running over a bystander.

My constituents tell me that whenever they approach the guardian of the young people involved they are verbally abused and many of the residence living close fear retribution if they contact the police.

I am aware that Homeswest have received complaints with relation to these issues and I would appreciate it if you could investigate the matter with some urgency and inform me as to what action has been taken.

Your urgent assistance on this issue would be appreciated.

Fair enough; these claims were brought to me by my constituents. I do not think they are making them up. Guess what? The police do not think they are making them up either. Where did I get with that? I wrote that letter in June 2012. The response came in September. I asked for the matter to be treated with some urgency. By September, I get a letter from another minister in the same government, this time Terry Redman, MLA, Minister for Housing. The letter states —

Dear Michelle

Thank you for your letter regarding antisocial behaviour coming from the public housing property at ...

As you are aware, the Liberal–National Government does not tolerate antisocial behaviour caused by its tenants.

No, I am not aware of that! All I am aware of is, yes, it does tolerate it. What a nonsense; what a letter!

He then went on to say —

Where the behaviour is in breach of their tenancy agreement, the appropriate action will be taken.

The *Residential Tenancies Act 1987* (RTA) requires the landlord to prove their tenant has breached their tenancy agreement.

And so forth and so on. Eventually the letter says —

The Department advises that it has investigated complaints but has been unable to prove that the tenant has been involved in antisocial behaviour.

Well, guess what? It obviously did not try very hard or speak to the neighbours and people around the area. Continuing —

The Department is unable to take any further action on this matter, however, the tenant has been reminded of their responsibilities in regards to the issues raised.

These are seriously bad tenants and a little reminder from the bureaucrats at the Department of Housing probably did not have much of an effect on them. The last paragraph reads —

Should your constituent —

There is more than one, but the letter says “constituent” —

experience any further problems, they are encouraged to report them to the WA Police and the Department’s Disruptive Behaviour Reporting Line ... and the appropriate action will be taken ...

Blah, blah. What happens then? Do I let the issue go? No. In October 2012, I write a letter to Hon Terry Redman —

Dear Minister

...

Thank you for your letter ...

I am at the understanding from my constituents that there have been many complaints made to both the Department for Housing and the Police regarding issues that have allegedly originated from this tenancy.

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Whilst I continue to encourage my constituents to lodge complaints with the Department and the Police if the problems persist, I am perplexed as to how an investigation has not been able to find any evidence of disruptive behaviour if my constituent's accusations regarding complaints are correct.

I seek your advice as to how many complaints the Department has received from neighbouring residents with relation to this dwelling and did the Department's investigation seek local Police input as to how many complaints they had received related to this residence?

Guess what? The police have no record of being contacted at any time during that period between one letter and the next, so the department's so-called investigation did not even check with police how many times they had turned out to that address or had had issues with those tenants. I received that letter back in October—keeping in mind that I asked for this matter to be addressed urgently.

With a few calls and a few reminders to the minister's office, we eventually got a response on 23 January before the caretaker period. Of course, by now, the minister is no longer responding to letters. Someone called Carissa Buckland, chief of staff, responded on behalf of Hon Terry Redman, MLA. Her letter reads —

Dear Mrs Roberts

On behalf of the Minister, thank you for your further letter regarding ...

Guess what the opening line of the next paragraph is? It is the same one I got six months before —

The Liberal–National Government will not tolerate antisocial behaviour caused by its tenants ...

It would be laughable if it were not so frightening for my constituents. It is the same sentence. This time the letter is not from the minister, but his chief of staff: "The Liberal–National Government will not tolerate it." Guess what? It does—over and over again. The letter goes on about a breach of behaviour and the tenancy agreement and how appropriate action will be taken. Keep in mind I asked how many complaints it had received. At this stage, the third paragraph of the letter states —

The Department has received six complaints against this tenancy in 2012, however, none of these have been able to be substantiated. The Department was unable to prove that the tenant had been involved in disruptive behaviour and therefore was unable to take action under the Disruptive Behaviour Management Strategy or the RTA regarding these complaints. The tenant has been reminded of their responsibilities in regards to the issues raised.

[Member's time extended.]

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: This is plagiarism from the minister's previous letter. Again, we are told that these very naughty people have been reminded about their responsibilities. I do not think they give a tinker's cuss because they have continued on with their behaviour and we have been told again to ring the hotline and whatever. Again, between all those dates, no contact was made with police. That is where we got the idea that we should follow up the matter again. We are not even up to the current minister yet. We followed the matter up yet again and said, "You've got to be joking. Why don't you talk to the police" or something along those lines.

A month later, on 22 February, we got a response from Mr Graeme Searle, director general of the Department of Housing, who wrote —

Dear Ms Roberts

Thank you for your letter requesting further information regarding disruptive behaviour occurring at the Department's property ...

The said address —

As you are aware a State Election is to be held on 9 March 2013. Following an election announcement the Government assumes a 'caretaker' role and, given these circumstances, the Minister has asked me to reply on his behalf.

I am advised that the Department sent a Request for Information to the WA Police in June 2012. The advice provided from the complainant to the Police was related to an incident which occurred at another location and therefore the Department was unable to take any further action on the matter. Since this time, further complaints were lodged with the Department, however the incidents were not reported to the WA Police and therefore the Department was unable to obtain further information from police.

The Department will continue to monitor this tenancy and, should further complaints be received and substantiated, the appropriate action will be taken ...

We immediately contacted the police and said, "What is going on here? Have you really told the Department of Housing you have no complaints and no problems there?" The police said that nothing could be further from the

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truth, and provided us with an email about the tenants, the call outs and the issues. So, did we give up? No, we did not. In April, I sent a more detailed letter to the current minister —

I am writing to you with regard to the ongoing Anti-Social behaviour that is emanating from the above Department of Housing residents and the reply I recently received from Mr Grahame Searle Director General for the Department of Housing stating that the Department has been unable to prove a case against these residents.

My office has been in touch with the local Police with relation to the ongoing issues and they have informed me that the residents of this dwelling are well known to them and that they are linked to burglaries, stolen scooters and general harassment of the suburb at large.

I believe as late as last week, Senior Sergeant Craig Davis in Charge Midland Police tried contacting Homeswest directly to discuss the issues related to this home but as of the time of writing this letter he was still waiting for a response.

So much for urgent attention from Homeswest —

My understanding is that there have been numerous complaints made to the police which have been verified by Senior Sergeant Davis with relation to the callouts the Police have made to this home.

My office has been inundated with complaints over the past few months regarding the behaviour of the residents of this house and this behaviour has been confirmed by the amount of regular police callouts to the house.

People living in close proximity to this home say they are living in fear of retribution if they are seen to complain and have been allegedly subjected to threats of violence with some people being forced to put their home up for sale as they see this as their only alternative.

According to the police the juveniles that live at this home are linked to what appears to be a scooter gang running around on unlicensed scooters in both Stratton and Jane Brook night and day causing residents grief.

This issue has gone on far too long and these tenants are creating havoc for the residents of Stratton and Jane Brook.

Can you explain why your Government talks tough about taking action against “disruptive” tenants but then does nothing to help in this most extreme of circumstances? There has been a failure to investigate or deal with this ongoing issue in a satisfactory or timely way. These tenants have the local community living in fear. The tenants’ behaviour is clear to the whole neighbourhood and the local Police. The Police are fully prepared to talk to your Department about these tenants.

THIS IS URGENT. I would ask that you take **IMMEDIATE ACTION** to resolve this issue and restore some peace and sanity to the neighbourhood.

I am not prepared to wait a month or more for a response to this letter. If I am not assured that you are now dealing with this issue as a matter of urgency I will take the issue up in the Parliament and in the media.

Your urgent assistance would be greatly appreciated.

When I checked what was happening after a couple of weeks, I was told the minister was on leave and I would have to wait. Anyway, eventually I got a response from the current minister stamped 1 May 2013. It says —

Dear Michelle

Thank you for your letters regarding further claims of ongoing disruptive behaviour at —
that address —

I can assure you that the Liberal–National Government takes strong action in cases of ongoing proven antisocial behaviour.

Well, nothing seems to change! I refer to the second paragraph. Can people imagine how reassuring that is when I get that from the minister—when he says, “I can assure you we take strong action”? I have had that assurance for the best part of a year with respect to this one address and it means nothing. It is just words. He says —

I can confirm that the Police contacted the Department of Housing in April 2013 in relation to this tenancy, specifically about stolen scooters and a related gang in the area. Action under the *Residential Tenancies Act 1987* is not appropriate for this type of behaviour and Magistrates will only grant orders to end the tenancy for tenancy related matters.

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But that is not what the minister said in Parliament yesterday. He did not say it would only be for tenancy related matters. I suggest that the minister should reread what he said because I do not have time to read that out just now. I continue —

In discussion with Police, concerns were also raised in relation to other behavioural issues at the tenancy which required further investigation by the Department. The Department has investigated the complaints received regarding the behaviour of the tenants and has taken appropriate action under the Government's Disruptive Behaviour Management Strategy. The Department will continue to monitor the situation and, if further complaints are received in the future that can be proven, action will be taken. I am also advised that a very recent complaint of alleged threatening behaviour is under investigation.

Minister, I have had mothers with young children crying in my office about the behaviour of these tenants. I had an elderly gentleman come into my office—I think it was in late March—frightened out of his wits. Scared stiff! He has been threatened. Does he have witnesses? Probably not. But there is a pattern here. There are so many people living there whose life is hell. I cannot exaggerate this too much. They have brought photographs in of stuff around the home, things connected to a vehicle. I do not think it is appropriate to outline all of that here today. However, I am aware of other things because the police have been relatively frank with me. There are other issues there, but if I am asked the question: should my local residents be concerned about these people? Yes, they should. Should they be afraid? Yes, I think they are justified in being afraid. Is it possible that these tenants could do them or their families some harm? Yes, it certainly is.

So people can see why I interjected yesterday. This is the worst case. I will not sit here and listen to platitudes about how strong the government is in dealing with disruptive behaviour. I have been fighting this case for about a year now. It took the first six months just to—well, it took more than that. It was not until April that the minister's department actually had a decent discussion with the police and, even then, that was instigated by the police. It is not good enough.

In my remaining time I want to briefly outline a case that I will probably have to continue at another stage, but it is in connection with a family in my electorate. It is about the growing waiting list. Firstly, the member for Cockburn made an excellent argument about how the waiting list is growing and how that is unacceptable. He asked what the minister is doing to get the waiting list down. He has made a case that the minister has not brought sufficient public housing online to be able to deal with the waiting list. Although one of the ways the minister has been acting to bring the waiting list down is culling people from it. I have had constituents that have been culled from it—some of them unfairly. Recently in April I had a couple come in and see me. They may have had a couple of their children with them. They outlined their circumstances—that is, they had lost their rental; they had been taken off the housing list. When you are homeless, being pushed from pillar to post with no permanent place to live, yes, people have to change address. What happens is that the Department of Housing sends out a letter and asks: "Do you still comply with everything? Are you still eligible for public housing?" If there is no reply to that letter, people get cut off the list.

My constituents first applied some four or five years ago. They have three young school-aged children—in fact, the youngest could be preschool, but young children. Not teenagers or older, but three young children. They could not pay their rent, they could not stay in their tenancy, they had to go somewhere. Therefore, they moved into a two-bedroom house in John Street in Midland. It was their parents' house. They moved in with the parents, but the only problem is that one of the sisters and brothers-in-law were already living there. There were already four people in this two-bedroom house—namely, the parents, the sister and her husband and now the two constituents who came to see me. I further point out that they have only now been regarded as being on the Department of Housing's waiting list for two or three months rather than four or five years. So they moved into their parents' house with their three children. They sleep in the sleep-out while the three kids sleep in the lounge. The wife is pregnant. They said to me, "If this cannot work out, what happens? Because we had been on the waiting list for five years, we thought we would get a house sometime soon. We cannot afford a private rental. We lost our last private rental because we could not pay the rent. Where do we go with three kids and another child on the way? We cannot stay at mum and dad's any longer because it is not acceptable to bring a new baby home to that situation. Mum and dad are renting, too. Their tenancy is being terminated in mid-September and the landlord is demolishing the house."

They have nowhere to go. I got an update earlier this week that the wife had—at 28 weeks' gestation—some pregnancy issues. In fact, she may have gone into labour. I have not been advised in the last couple of days as to what has gone on there, but they may well have a premature baby to deal with now. They will be homeless very shortly. With three children who need to be cared for, need to go to school, need to have a roof over their head, it is dire.

I have another circumstance in which the couple have sold their car in order to pay their rent. When they get kicked out of their house soon they will not even have a car to live in. These are dire circumstances. The shame is that I am totally frustrated. I have never been so frustrated on these issues. I have had other ministers in past governments who have responded well and who have sorted out these most extreme of circumstances, but this government has failed.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms L.L. Baker): The member for Gosnells.

Dr A.D. BUTI: The member for Armadale.

The ACTING SPEAKER: I am sorry, the member for Armadale.

Dr A.D. BUTI: We are close to each other, geographically speaking.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Not far enough up the line!

DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale) [5.17 pm]: Thank you very much, Madam Acting Speaker. I also rise to make a contribution to the motion moved by the member for Cockburn that this house condemns the government for its failures in the housing portfolio; in particular, public housing. Of course, the minister is the current minister responsible for this area, but this motion is basically a sorry critique of the government since the Barnett government was elected in 2008. I want to break my contribution up into a number of sections—disruptive behaviour; the homeless issue; and maintenance, with some other comments.

I know the minister previously lived in Armadale, so he knows the area, although I would think there is probably not a lot of public housing in his electorate. I may not be right there, but I have put a question on notice —

Mr W.R. Marmion: There are some along the railway line at Subiaco and at Mt Claremont, but that is about all.

Dr A.D. BUTI: Not many though. Not much. I have actually put some questions on notice for the minister in regard to public housing density in various electorates; it will be interesting to read his answers. If I am right, I think the Gallop government philosophy was to try to ensure that public housing was dispersed throughout the metropolitan area rather than trying to confine it to certain areas, which creates its own problems. Public housing is a very important necessity or requirement that governments provide, but the majority of public housing should not be confined to a few selected areas for a number of reasons.

I will move on to the issue of disruptive behaviour. Many of the things I am about to say are really a repeat of what the member for Midland just articulated. I will home in on one particular case in Armadale. It relates to a Homeswest house. A number of neighbours have complained because they strongly believe it is a drug house where people come to trade in drugs. Cars pull up every two minutes. A taxi even arrived at the doorstep, someone got out, went into the house for a few minutes and came out with a package and off they went. Observations have been made of mums with young children in prams going to the house to purchase drugs. The neighbours have reported this numerous times to the police. My office has contacted the Department of Housing, which sent inspectors to the house. The accommodation manager stated that she reported a strong smell of bleach at the property and suspected that the property may be a drug lab. This was in February. More complaints have been made. Finally, the Department of Housing has informed us that a court date has been set to deal with unlicensed vehicles at, and the standards of, the property.

There needs to be better coordination between the Department of Housing and the police. When a complaint is made to the disruptive behaviour unit at the Department of Housing, witnesses or a police report are required. The problem is that sometimes the police do not turn up. Only last week I received an email from a tenant in Brookdale, which is in the City of Armadale. She is a teacher who lives on her own. She complained about children climbing over her fence, throwing a heavy hammer at a dog, climbing on her roof and throwing objects at her fence. She called the police but the police did not attend. Of course, the Minister for Police tells me there are no real problems in Armadale, but I have to admit that the police presence in Armadale has improved. The tenant contacted the Department of Housing and the department told her to keep making complaints and that she should get a police report. She cannot get a police report if the police do not turn up. How many complaints does she have to make? This woman lives on her own in Department of Housing premises. I do not know how many complaints she needs to make, minister.

The situation in some areas in my electorate is just unbearable—unbearable for the people in public housing who are being disrupted by other tenants in public housing, and for the people who are not. It is not all public housing, but today we are dealing with the minister's responsibility for public housing. A number of people have stated that they have rung the Department of Housing but they keep being told that they have to make a complaint and then another complaint and then another complaint. It is not fair on those people who live in Department of Housing premises and do the right thing and behave appropriately. Most people who live in Homeswest premises behave themselves. I do not want to victimise or stereotype Homeswest tenants, but there

is an element that is making it unbearable for others. Although I admit that the Department of Housing has improved slightly since it set up the disruptive behaviour unit, a lot still needs to be done. The problem is that when the department drags its feet and does nothing about unruly and unbearable tenants, it is being unfair to those on the waiting list.

That leads me to my next point about people who are homeless or just cannot find accommodation. There is a very sorry case of a woman whose name I will not use who is a victim of domestic violence. She has a number of young children. She is homeless. She had to sell the house that she owned with her former partner because of domestic violence issues. She went to a women's refuge, but because of the number of children she has, it was not appropriate and she was told that she had to leave. She has been battling to have a roof over her head and her children's heads on a nightly basis. Homeswest says that it does not have a house big enough to take her family. I understand that there is a shortage, but that makes it more crucial that the people who behave themselves are given priority and that people who do not behave themselves know that the consequence will be eviction. That is very difficult because evicting tenants may make them homeless. I understand it is a very complex issue, but, in the end, priority has to be given to people who obey the rules.

Mr W.R. Marmion: I agree.

Dr A.D. BUTI: It is a really difficult situation, minister, but at the moment I do not believe the Department of Housing is properly attending to or responding to significant antisocial behaviour. I am not just talking about a bit of loud noise. I am sure that there is a lot of loud noise on a Friday night in the minister's electorate with all the students. I am talking about severe and significant antisocial and criminal activity that is damaging property and threatening lives.

There is the incident of the woman with a number of children who is the victim of domestic violence. Another gentleman is currently waiting on an appeal decision because he has been refused priority status. At the moment, he lives with his son in his lounge room. There are three other adults in the house, one of whom is in a wheelchair. This gentleman who came to us has serious ongoing medical issues. He cannot find accommodation. At the moment he lives with his son, but that can be only a short-term proposition. My office has for a number of years been dealing with another gentleman who had to leave private rental accommodation some years ago. He has a mental illness and also has custody of his teenage daughter, who has diabetes. This person has no fixed address, but he has managed to ensure that his daughter receives a proper education. She has been attending school on a regular basis. The lack of appropriate accommodation was brought home to me on Monday night when I went to a meeting of the committee of one of the schools in my electorate. Forty per cent of the student population at that school is transient, the major cause being inadequate accommodation. Not all of it is public accommodation; some is private. That is a significant burden that we will have to carry down the track; if these kids are not being educated, there will be further problems down the line and even greater stress on public housing.

The issue of maintenance has been a perennial criticism made of this government and the ministers who have held this portfolio since 2008. For whatever reason, the government decided to go down the path of the contracting-out method. Julie Bishop says that it is in the DNA of Liberal governments to always have a surplus. We know that is rubbish. It also appears to be in the DNA of Liberal governments to privatise or outsource everything. The outsourcing of the maintenance contract for Homeswest properties has been an utter disaster. As the minister knows, many grievances and motions have been brought before this house about the maintenance issue. Not only is it inefficient, but also a considerable amount of money is being wasted. For instance, I will talk about 23 Sherbourne Way, Armadale, a complex occupied by seniors. The residents made numerous complaints to the Department of Housing about an enclosure that was dangerous at night-time because there was not enough lighting. It did not need to be there. The department engaged a private contractor to remove this enclosure, but only half of it was removed so someone had to come back out again and remove the rest of it. I have the quote here. It cost \$865, including GST, to remove this rather simple brick enclosure, which I am sure would have taken a couple of healthy, fit adults no more than half an hour to remove. I am sure the government has been motivated to privatise because it thinks it will be more efficient and save money. That has definitely not been the case. There are other maintenance issues at the complex that have not been attended to.

If a contractor goes out to a job that has been approved and finds other maintenance issues when they get there, they are not allowed to attend to them. Another job description has to be made and they have to receive more paperwork before they can attend to the other maintenance issues. How inefficient and stupid is it that they have to keep going back to ensure that the proper contractual arrangements have been entered into before they attend to the other maintenance issues? When it was done in-house and a maintenance person employed by the Department of Housing went to the property, he could have done up to five jobs, but under the private system—the outsourcing system that this and previous ministers have engaged in—it has become incredibly inefficient.

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I want to turn briefly to Access Housing. As the minister knows, Access Housing provides people with public housing but the tenants who benefit from Access Housing's services generally have an income that is slightly higher than that of most Homeswest tenants. There is a housing complex in Kelmscott, which is medium to high density.

Mr W.R. Marmion: Where is it?

Dr A.D. BUTI: It is in Streich Avenue, Kelmscott. I am sure the minister sitting next to the Minister for Housing knows where that is, although it is in my electorate. It is between the highway and the railway line. The concept behind it makes sense but it is a major centre of antisocial behaviour and alleged drug activity.

Ms R. Saffioti: Where is it?

Dr A.D. BUTI: It is in Streich Avenue, near the shopping centre. There are major problems there. I went to a community meeting there. A lot of the people who attended are petrified. They contacted the Access Housing management team. Allegedly—I do not know whether this is true—one of the Access Housing staff said, "What do you expect when you have high-density public housing?" If true, that is atrocious if that is true. If that is true, that is appalling.

[Member's time extended.]

Dr A.D. BUTI: I wrote to Access Housing about this concerned group of tenants who had a number of complaints. They were alleging drug activity and general antisocial behaviour. This housing complex backs onto McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken et cetera. The tenants complained that a number of people were jumping the fence into the complex. They would like a gate put up at the entrance, so it would basically be a gated community. They were told that an electronic gate would be erected. I wrote to Access Housing on 10 April. My office received a response on 17 May. The letter was written on 15 May. It took over a month. Maybe that is reasonable, but I thought it could have responded a bit quicker. It states —

Access Housing takes its responsibilities as a landlord seriously and respects the right of tenants to live safely and peacefully. 30 Streich Avenue has had a prolonged history of problematic tenancies and the tenancy manager is regularly in attendance at the complex in an effort to address anti-social behaviour. These efforts include involvement of the police and, where appropriate, eviction of tenants who are in breach of their tenancy agreements.

Despite this effort, we recognise there are ongoing problems which continue to cause safety concerns for many residents.

Access Housing is well aware of the level of antisocial behaviour at this complex and the concerns of the tenants. The letter continues —

Access Housing has previously considered physical measures that may improve safety at the complex and in light of the current situation will review our options again, including the adequacy of fences.

It is obvious what needs to be done. A higher fence needs to be erected so people cannot jump from Kentucky Fried Chicken and the other fast food outlets on the highway into this complex. I do not know why Access Housing needs to review it again; it is quite obvious. Maybe its refusal to install an electronic gate at the entrance has some validity. I do not know if that is true. It says that electronic gates have not worked in the past in similar estates, stating —

... in our experience electronic gates have little value in a complex of this size as the security codes are quickly distributed by residents to their visitors.

That may be true. I still do not know whether that is a good enough reason not to at least give it a go. Access Housing has said that it will now engage a security officer but this will only be a short-term measure. I think it has to be a long-term measure. Access Housing says it is not good for the tenants to have a security officer there. Maybe not in one aspect, but I think the residents want to feel safe. On the balance of probabilities, it would be better to have security officers there than have no-one. A lot of the people who live in that estate are elderly. They are very scared. Surely they have a right to go to sleep at night without being concerned about who will jump the fence. If Access Housing is not going to install an electronic gate, it needs to install a higher fence around the complex that faces the highway immediately and also have a sufficient security presence on a full-time basis; otherwise, it is just pointless.

I will not go on for much longer. I have raised a number of questions that the minister will receive by way of questions on notice. They basically ask what the public housing density is in my electorate vis-a-vis other electorates; what is the ratio of public housing to private housing in my electorate; and what changes to the mixture of public housing in the various electorates have been made since the Barnett government came to power? I would be very interested to know whether the department has sold public housing in the leafy western

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suburbs and if it has, where have new Homeswest premises been built? As I stated, I do not think it is very good public policy to congregate public housing in one area.

Mr W.R. Marmion: We built some nice new ones on the old Hollywood site in my electorate. I forgot to mention those.

Dr A.D. BUTI: That is very promising. What are the selection criteria for people to occupy those homes?

Mr W.R. Marmion: Those are run by the community housing sector.

Dr A.D. BUTI: That is the end of my contribution, and I look forward to the minister answering my questions.

MR M.P. MURRAY (Collie–Preston) [5.40 pm]: I thank you, Madam Acting Speaker, for the call, as I know some of my colleagues also wish to speak. I wish to add to the debate on this motion. I see the effect of the public housing crisis on a regular basis, and it is quite dear to my heart. Collie does not have a Department of Housing office, so my electorate office acts as a de facto housing office, and we are very close to the issue. My staff work tirelessly on behalf of people seeking public housing. My staff contact and work in conjunction with the Bunbury office of the Department of Housing. They do their best. An email came through today that refers to Mr Todd Harding, who came in to inquire about his spot on the public housing waiting list. He applied for housing in 2009. Currently, the department is processing applications from 2007. The waiting times for public housing have blown out to six years. It can be shorter in certain areas because it averages out, but because Mr Harding is happy to have a one-bedroom place, I would have thought it would be far easier to place a person like him than a person who needs a three-bedroom house. This person has been waiting six years. In comparison, some older people or families could wait eight or nine years for a three-bedroom house.

We have a problem not only with extended waiting lists, but also structurally, when people applying for public housing give their current address. A lot of those people move on very quickly because they wear out their welcome living in someone's spare room, sleeping on the veranda or shed, and in some cases in their car in someone's backyard. Therefore, the address they have given to the department becomes redundant and their mail is returned—or is not returned at all. Those people are then taken off the public housing waiting list. It is devastating when they contact the department to find out they have been taken off the waiting list and they must apply again and will be at the bottom of the waiting list again. Even though they explain to the department that they have been waiting for five years, the department's response is, "Sorry, you didn't answer the letter and you're back at the bottom of the six-year waiting list." They have already waited for five years, and as a result of this structural problem, they could wait for up to 10 years! I see members in this chamber nodding their heads, having heard those stories before. It is absolutely soul destroying for those people. What do they do? They turn to alcohol and drugs to give them some comfort. I see that with young people today. I heard one of the most horrific stories from a young lass—I think it has been fixed now—who came to my electorate office to talk about getting a public housing home. She was on the waiting list, but she told me was living in a house with 12 people and that she had just handed her baby to her grandparents to care for because her housemates were complaining about the baby crying at night-time. She said that she could not go back to her mum and dad's place. She said, "We're over that. We've made a decision. I've had to give my baby up to my grandparents." That is such a soul-destroying story, and I do not think that is uncommon.

Even in a small town like Collie—this is quite humorous in one respect—out at the local swimming hole, there are people sleeping in their car and in a tent, and, to try to subsidise their income, they have three or four chickens and some cauliflowers growing in some pot plants placed around their car. As we run into winter, I am sure they will move on and go to another town in a warmer area, where they can live in a little more comfort. However, they will be out of contact with the Department of Housing again. I am not sure what we can do about that.

Another aspect of that relates to homeless people. I walk from Parliament House to the city from time to time, and I see the regulars, including one gentleman who lies on the lawn out the front here. He has been there for about nine years. He frequents the grounds of Parliament House during the day; he keeps to himself and is no bother to anyone. However, I see more people are moving into the city. The other night I saw a lady. She had her own telly, the whole lot! It was raining really heavily and she was in a corner getting some warmth from an air-conditioning vent. We are starting to get the problems that we see in some of the larger cities in the world. Homelessness is a very obvious problem. I am not sure about some of the people who sit down in the middle of the mall from day to day with a hat asking for money; they look a bit too fat for me. There are certainly people who are down on their luck, and are probably in the same position I have described and are looking for accommodation that is not available.

In Collie, a lot of the state housing stock is 60-plus years old and was brought into the town in crates and assembled, which is similar to what we do today. A lot of the homes in Collie were brought in from America, but

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times have moved on. Some people in Collie are living in houses without floor coverings because the Department of Housing has refused to put some down and has told them they will have to wait until the next budget is brought down. They are living in houses that have tin roofs without insulation, or that have single asbestos walls that are very thin. They are very uncomfortable. People have been accused of destroying or damaging some of these houses, because their frustration has come out. That frustration really stands out because they feel they have been treated as second-class citizens when the standard of their public housing home is not up to the Australian standard. I am sure this occurs in other areas. I must say there have been some good programs, for example, in Carey Park. The people in Brunswick also experience these problems. What then happens is that the people who take those substandard houses are probably down the bottom end of the socioeconomic scale. We cause our own problems, and in some cases we have created ghettos. It does concern me that there does not seem to be any control or understanding in smaller towns, in the main, about where the department places families. I have begged the Department of Housing at times not to place a certain family opposite another family. I have asked them to use local knowledge. Let us say that a family from Northam or Mt Barker goes to the top of the waiting list and is required to go to Collie; however, the family is not part of the Collie community group. The Collie people take their cars over to Northam or Mt Barker and have a fight and then come back. That puts huge pressures on the communities and also the police. This occurs because people are desperate to take a house when it is offered. We see people who go to not only Collie, but also other country areas because the department has allocated them a house, but the department forgets that their partner may be in jail or working somewhere else, and there is no regular public transport or the cost of the public transport is too high, so they have to go back to Perth. The department is not showing enough feeling for people or evaluating where people are put. A lot of these people need help in the social sense. We have to work on that in conjunction with the Department of Housing and other departments. What they do now is say, "You've got your house; you should be happy"! Things can fall apart very quickly, particularly if the Department of Housing is not able to provide services to support these people. These people leave and go to the bottom of the list again, so around they go again. One Aboriginal family in Collie lived in the back room of their brother's house and paid rent for two years. This is a family, not just a couple or a single person. They finally got a house, but it was in a deplorable state. The handrails on the front steps were not welded on and could be pushed over. I went to have a look because they made a complaint about how bad it was, and the painter told me that he could paint only one wall in that room. The amount of paint spilled onto the ground would have been more than the amount of paint used to paint one wall of a house that small! The new tenants were not allowed to paint the whole wall where the holes made by previous tenants had been patched so there were roller marks up and down the wall. How can we expect people to have confidence in the system and say that they are proud of their house when they are walking into that sort of thing? I am talking about 60-year-old houses. When standing in the lounge room, people can see the ground underneath through in the gaps in the floor. Homeswest said it would put in floorcoverings but the prospective tenants were so desperate for housing that they said they would take it just in case someone else got it. They were not worried about the floorcoverings then, but when they moved in they began to live with the reality of the wind blowing up through the floor. That is just not good enough. The stove did not shut properly either and the tenants used a picket to push the stove shut so they could cook their meals. That had been reported but nothing was done about it. They are the sorts of problems we see on a daily basis. Some members opposite will say that those people should get off their rear ends and do something about their situation.

I believe another problem we will have in the near future is people coming down to Collie and taking short-term accommodation. Collie has about 40 empty private rental houses. Construction jobs have gone so things are winding down and there is a plan to place people on short-term visas into some of the private rental accommodation. That will push up the price of the houses around the area and the people who want to get out of Homeswest housing will no longer be able to afford to. The uptake of the private rental houses by people on short-term visas, which is being done through the federal government, will push up the price of the available housing. That is good for the people who are leasing their house but not for those who are trying to move from a Homeswest house into a private house that has a bit more comfort and, in some people's minds, more prestige. They will not be able to move because the \$50 a week increase in rents will prevent them from doing so. We will have those problems in the near future. People in Homeswest houses are trying hard to move up into the next bracket and become self-sufficient by not leaning on the government all the time, but some serious and fundamental flaws in the provision of Homeswest housing need to be addressed. I will raise some of those issues tomorrow in my grievance to the minister. It is estimated to cost the Department of Housing \$140 000 tops to totally refurbish a house in Collie. Although some people wish to do the right thing, I have seen a property that was in a deplorable state within weeks of being upgraded and I did not see anyone pull those people into gear. I am involved with Homeswest and write personal letters to the tenants who I have helped get into houses to tell them that if they mess up, they cannot expect support from me again. A lot of people have helped them along the way, including government agencies. If people get given housing and ruin that house, they do not deserve my help again. I can furnish those letters; there is no problem about that. I send them to Homeswest and to the police

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 22 May 2013]

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station. I do that so people know we are dinkum about the people we are trying to help and that we are trying to make sure the tenants do not destroy government property.

Another thing that annoys me immensely is that some people sell their private home and put their names on the waiting list. Those people get up my nose, to say the least, and they get short shrift from me. They say to me that so-and-so has one, so why can I not have one? When someone moves out of their own home to subsidise their lifestyle, they should be right down at the bottom of the waiting list.

There is anecdotal evidence about empty houses in Collie. I have put questions on notice about this previously and I have another one on notice at the moment. However, the answer to the first question certainly was not suitable. It said that there were no empty Homeswest houses in Collie. That is just not true. I would say there are between 10 and 20 empty Homeswest houses in Collie. A problem we have is that some people have two houses under two partners' names and they move up and down from the city. They might spend three months in one house but they have internal problems and go back to the other house. One family is really occupying two houses. That has to be looked at very seriously because the houses fall into disrepair when the tenants are not there and the windows get broken.

Mr W.R. Marmion: How do you reckon we can deal with that? Do you have any ideas?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: In that case, if they are registered and have kids and are getting extra funds due to the children, it should not be hard to trace them back as a de facto couple. I believe that a de facto couple is entitled to only one house, not two. It is a bit different if someone has a partner who lives down the street and they stay there for one or two nights—some people call that fence-jumping. That is a different matter, but I am talking about people who move out of the house and leave it vacant. The people who cannot get a Homeswest house then say, “What about me? That house down Laurie Street is vacant. Why can't I move in there?” Some squatting goes on, but not a great deal. They are the sorts of reasons that I believe we are running into problems in the housing system. Scrutiny is a problem, which the member for Midland has talked about. Another problem is maintenance. Some people believe there is a stigma about moving into a state house. Some of the stock should be bulldozed and replaced. We know that we do not have the money for that but surely there should be some sort of planning. One of the very popular types of housing is group housing in which the units are in a circle. The people unofficially look after each other because they know the other people.

I rang Homeswest about a young girl who moved into a flea-infested house. I actually paid for the house to be decontaminated. My staff said that I cannot keep doing that but I did not want to see the little baby who was living in that house bitten and taken to the hospital, which would cost money in another area through the social welfare system. Despite numerous phone calls, nothing was done. People could not walk up the front step of that house either because the boards had just been nailed. It is a difficult job and I am not saying that all the problems can be fixed in a day, but adequate funds must be provided and support must be given to those families. We need to work very closely with the agencies to find out exactly what is going wrong with those houses. Much more thought needs to be given and more processes need to be put in place about where people are placed. It is no good providing someone with a house in Kwinana when they have no support or help and it is no good placing someone who cannot drive into a country area. Those sorts of issues cause other problems. We must be reminded that not everyone in Homeswest housing is crooked or antisocial. There are some good tenants. One of the problems with being a good tenant is that when a three-bedroom property is tenanted by one person who was placed there when the pressure for social housing was not great, that person gets kicked out. I understand the reasoning behind that but it does not encourage people to look after their property if they do not have security. We have a long way to go. I support the motion that has been moved. We need far more funding.

MS M.M. QUIRK (Girrawheen) [5.59 pm]: This motion condemns the government for its failures in the housing portfolio, particularly public housing. We have heard a lot about public housing from previous speakers. I certainly concur with everything that has been said in terms of the very hairy-chested rhetoric that comes from the government about cracking down on antisocial behaviour. The reality is that it is anything but hairy chested; it is very limp wristed. If anything, the response to antisocial behaviour has got worse. Also, people are put in physical harm's way, at risk of disease and/or personal injury, in the way that some of the repairs to public housing are undertaken, the time that it takes to implement maintenance, and the half-hearted and unprofessional way in which it is executed. We have heard much about that.

I want to talk briefly about the government's responsibility in the broader housing market. Part of the issue with stress on public housing is that private rental accommodation is now incredibly expensive. It is less accessible to many people. That puts greater demands on public housing. It is a vicious cycle. The government has some responsibility in the broader housing market and, I contend, it has failed not only to deliver public housing to a humane standard—I use that word advisedly—but also to do what I think are fundamental measures to pull the right levers for affordable housing generally.

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My colleague the member for Cockburn has already referred to a report tabled by the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee in 2011. I was a member of that committee. It was chaired by the former member for Joondalup. To reinforce my point on the government's responsibility in broader housing issues, I refer to four findings in that report. Finding 19 states —

The development industry believes that over the past decade there has been a rapidly increasing cost to develop a housing lot because of greater environmental scrutiny and engineering inputs. The reduction in lots being brought to market and the impact of these additional costs has ensured that the price of land has added to the total cost of an average new home in Perth.

Similarly, finding 20 states —

There are significant delays in Western Australia in obtaining planning approvals for new housing subdivisions. Some sections of the State's development and construction industry attribute these delays as the main reason for the rising costs of residential development and consequent decrease in housing affordability.

In fact, one quite well known developer estimated that the red tape and the various additional approvals they are now required to undergo add approximately \$30 000 per lot. Finding 22 states —

In addition to the direct costs associated with the development process, there are also significant financial costs associated with delays experienced in securing planning approval. These costs not only impact on the affordability of housing products but in some circumstances may affect the viability of a project. This leads to longer-term housing supply constraints.

Finally, finding 24 states —

While noting the broader State and national agendas for reform to reduce 'red tape', there has been limited progress made in achieving simplicity and consistency in the State's planning processes. The newly established Development Assessment Panels, which became operational in July 2011, may resolve some of these issues.

The development assessment panels of course relate to projects worth a certain amount.

The government needs to exercise leadership. For example, it needs to get its own house in order by ensuring those properties that are brought to market in the private area are not subject to the burdensome red tape that increases the price and limits housing affordability. It also needs to exercise some leadership in terms of local government, local government's participation in planning approvals, and having a level of flexibility about the kinds of housing standards it will apply. There is not nearly enough flexibility in Western Australia relating to the materials used and the kind of property that will be approved.

During the election campaign the government made some announcements related to granny flats. In the report I referred to, the committee referred to them as "Fonzie" flats. Demographics are changing and family composition is much more diverse than it was, so there needs to be greater flexibility in housing choice. A simple amendment to the Local Government Act would enable much more participation by local government in the construction of affordable housing. That amendment would stop constraints on local government in terms of financing. It would enable them, as happened in the Elizabeth council in South Australia, to use the national rental affordability scheme. They could use their part of the contribution to a development as land, and partner with the commonwealth to attract NRAS funding. That seems to be another area in which government could activate some improvements. I wholeheartedly agree with this motion. There needs to be a whole-of-government approach. At the moment, we tend to have some tension between the various portfolios. I think that actually exacerbates existing problems.

Minister Buswell started off as Minister for Housing, then it was the current minister, Minister Marmion, then it was Minister Buswell yet again, then Minister Redman and now back to the current minister. I do not know whether that means the housing portfolio is a poisoned chalice or what it means. I am finding it particularly frustrating. If I can use the expression of that famous American sporting identity "Yogi" Berra, "It's deja vu all over again."

I will provide an example in the context of affordable housing. Some years ago, two primary schools closed in my electorate. It was decided that one site would be developed by LandCorp. That is not progressing quickly, but more quickly than the site that is being developed by the Department of Housing. It has been eight or nine years since it was known that the school would close. From recollection, it closed in 2007. I wrote to the current minister, in his first incarnation as Minister for Housing, about the Hainsworth Primary School site. That could potentially deliver up to 93 lots for affordable housing. My electorate is 16 or 17 kilometres from the CBD.

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Access to public transport is not fantastic but it is not bad. Certainly, a lot of people would consider that to be a desirable place to move into a first home. In April of this year, I wrote a letter to the minister, which reads —

I write concerning the lack of progress for the development of the former Hainsworth Primary School site.

It is well documented that this site has been the focus of ongoing anti-social and criminal behaviour for many years which has been to the detriment to the many local residents who live near the site.

I was advised by yourself —

Note the date —

in November 2010 that the Department was progressing rezoning over the site to enable a residential development. This was likely to take around 12 months to complete.

That brings us up to November 2011. The letter continues —

I understand the zoning amendment was completed and gazetted on 8 February 2011.

It was some six months after the time that the minister said, but that is over two years ago now —

I am also aware that the Department determined the site would be better developed by an internal management team as opposed to the New North Project.

I have spoken about that in this place on many occasions, and I think it has done a great job in revitalising my electorate. It continues —

This was likely to have some impact on the project timeframe.

That now proves to be an extraordinary understatement —

I received this advice mid-2012.

I would be grateful if you could promptly advise on the current status of the project so that I can advise my long suffering constituents.

We have had two ministers since I first corresponded with the minister on this matter, and the minister is now holding the baby again. But it is just not satisfactory. This lot is in an area where its development would not cause major objections from people in the surrounding area. In fact, they would welcome new families moving in, they would welcome new houses, they would welcome antisocial behaviour and vandalism being eliminated, and they would welcome the development. So, there will certainly not be any hold-ups with community consultation, yet it has taken this inordinate amount of time, and I simply do not understand why. I think my constituents have been incredibly patient, and it is about time we had an explanation. I note that I wrote to the minister on 23 April. That is only a month ago, and these things ordinarily would take longer. I would be prepared to wait a couple more weeks if the minister has some positive news for me. This is what I am talking about. This is not a greenfields site. The minister should be seizing the opportunity to develop affordable housing in areas such as this where there is already some level of community infrastructure, but for some reason it just does not seem to take priority. I think it is very, very disappointing, and it is for that reason that I wholeheartedly support this motion.

MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [6.12 pm]: I rise to make some brief comment on this important debate. I am indebted to the shadow Minister for Housing for bringing on this debate, because in my area, and particularly the Kwinana part of my electorate, no other issue has more impact on the community, which is in great crisis, than housing. Housing is the key issue that impacts upon the constituents who come into my office. They are constantly seeking assistance with how they can resolve the myriad housing difficulties that they confront. Indeed, it is an issue that greatly stresses my staff. Well in excess of 80 per cent of the inquiries that we encounter involve housing. This is not something that we can look at as “business as usual”; this is a crisis that is impacting on the community. We have only to look at the waitlist numbers in my area to appreciate or get a picture of that impact.

In Kwinana over 1 800 people are on the general waiting list, which is more than 900 applications for housing in a single area. Those people are told that they will wait a number of years to get housing. Obviously, for some of those people the situation becomes acute. It becomes an issue of extreme priority, and they are placed on the priority waitlist. As at 31 March, in the Kwinana area alone, 550 people are on the priority housing list, representing 238 applications. We have an extremely high level of stress in the Kwinana community simply because the government cannot resolve the issue of waitlists in housing. Shadow Minister for Housing, the waitlist across the state is about —

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Mr F.M. Logan: It's over 22 000.

Mr R.H. COOK: It is around 22 000. In my area alone there are 1 861 people, so almost 10 per cent of the people on the state's public housing waitlist are in the area of Kwinana. That is an indictment of what we are doing in this state.

Mr W.R. Marmion: That's the applications. You said 900, but it is a bit less than that.

Mr R.H. COOK: There are 22 000 applications, are there?

Mr F.M. Logan: Yes, there are 22 000 applications. It's still high.

Mr R.H. COOK: It is still a very high number.

Mr W.R. Marmion: I just want to get the figure right.

Ms J.M. Freeman: If there are 22 000 on the waitlist, there will be a lot more applications than that.

Mr F.M. Logan: There would be more applications than 22 000. They are actually on the waiting list, according to your annual report.

Mr W.R. Marmion: Correct. Your figure was absolutely correct, member.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, members. For the benefit of Hansard, can we just keep the debate a bit orderly.

Mr R.H. COOK: I thought perhaps Hansard might explain to me what that whole discussion was about! Perhaps the member for Cockburn and the minister can clarify that point. We have 1 861 people on the waitlist in Kwinana, compared with the statewide figure, which is —

Mr F.M. Logan: Over 22 000.

Mr R.H. COOK: Yes, 22 000. I have a very high proportion of that number in my area alone. I hope that clarifies it for everyone.

In Kwinana, we have a chronic shortage of housing, leading to an extremely stressed community because people are simply unable to get the housing they need for their families. Of course, for many of these people the private rental market is simply out of the question. We had a debate at this time last week with the Minister for Planning about the knock-on effect of not having enough housing lots coming onto the market to stimulate the private investment market and then potentially the private rental market. We have a private rental market that is already overheated driving up rental prices, which are completely beyond the people who rely upon public housing, so they continue to rely upon public housing to meet their housing needs. It is clear that the public housing stock is simply not keeping pace with demand, and that is why we are seeing these extraordinary blowouts. This produces situations that are highly stressful for the people concerned.

One mother who came to see me is seven months' pregnant. She has three children in care, and has been told by the Department for Child Protection and Family Support that unless she can find stable housing—that is, unless she can find accommodation, and for her public housing is the only option—when her child is born, the department will take that child away. In just a few months she will give birth to that child, and unless she finds accommodation in that time—remember, public housing for these people in need is the only option—she will have that child taken away. This is a crisis; this is a situation of acute need. Another mother who approached us is already on the priority list. She is homeless. She has three daughters, and she has a fourth child due at the end of this month. She is homeless with three children and another one on the way, so they are in need of care. In many of these cases, these people are in need of a stable living arrangement so that they can access other welfare services to create some stability in their lives.

I draw a third case to the house's attention. This particular person is on the priority list and currently living in a two-bedroom house with a partner and two children, with a third child on its way in a few weeks. This five-person family is living in a two-bedroom house that has been borrowed from a friend. Again, people are in a demonstrably difficult housing state of crisis and they are unable to access housing, and when they go onto the priority list, they are told that the wait is around 12 months or more. What is to become of these people? Essentially they couch surf, borrow bedrooms and live in cars, and some live rough simply because the Barnett government is not keeping pace with the demand for these sorts of services. What is even more frustrating is that we see housing stock sitting idle. I have one very good friend whose mother was in the final stages of life, and in the last few months of her life had to be housed in a palliative care facility. While my friend was trying to make arrangements for his mum, who was very ill at this point, he had to vacate a Homeswest house that his mum had lived in for over 40 years and had kept immaculate during that time. As soon as she went into palliative care, the Department of Housing was on the phone harassing my friend and saying that he had to take his mother's things

out of that house because there were people in need who needed to move in. Those phone calls were bordering on harassment until he actually vacated the house. If my memory serves me correctly, he told his mum that the house was still there and it was okay, but in reality he had to vacate it. That is a sad story if indeed it is the case, but what actually did happen is that that house then lay vacant for 10 months. This house was one of the original Homeswest houses built in Kwinana in the early to mid-1950s and had been cared for by this particular woman all that time until recently. This house was kept immaculate; it was in great condition. What happens to a house in any community that is left vacant for 10 months? Of course, people start to look at it. Kids perhaps find it an interesting place to explore. Eventually the back door comes off, the copper piping disappears, the windows get broken and the whole thing falls into disrepair. It is even sadder to have to report to this place that the house was finally demolished in March this year because it had fallen into a state of disrepair. That house was vacated because my constituent was told it was required for needy people and that there is a chronic need for housing. It should have gone straight to another needy tenant, but it was left vacant for 10 months and fell into a state of disrepair to the point where it had to be demolished. Of course, the theory in the community is that this is the modus operandi for the Department of Housing; when it has housing stock that it wants demolished, it allows it to go into disrepair so it can then throw up its hands and say to the local council that it is no longer fit for human habitation and has to be demolished. I do not know if that is the case, but it is certainly reinforced on an ongoing basis by the people who see public housing stock left vacant and who ask the questions: what the hell is going on; why do we have people living on the streets; why do we have such a long priority waiting list; and why do we have such a huge general waiting list for public housing when these houses are allowed to be vacant for so long and then demolished? For the record, minister, that house was located at 15 Clint Way in Calista and was demolished on 5 March this year.

Mr W.R. Marmion: And it was vacant for over 10 months prior?

Mr R.H. COOK: Yes. This is the pattern of behaviour with Homeswest housing that is observed by many people in the community, and it adds to their frustration because they know that there is a housing shortage. They know that these houses can be brought on stream yet they sit there and fall into disrepair, and that is obviously causing a great deal of concern.

That is a snapshot of what is going on in just my area, and if that is indeed what is going on in other areas—the figures may not be so high—that is an indictment on this government. While we have over 22 000 applications—after that series on interjections I am still not quite clear on the numbers—we will continue to have dysfunction and stress within our communities. Other community service agencies will also have to struggle with this in order to make up for the damage that our shortage of public housing has created.

We know that there is not an easy fix. We know that this takes a lot of hard work, but, obviously, it is a concern that in my area in 2012–13, just 16 dwellings were added to the total public housing stock, and that will increase by just 20 in 2013–14. That tells me that we are looking at a “business as usual” scenario and that the department is allowing things to tick over and trundle on, whereas we need a government in this state that is prepared to put the pedal to the metal and make a difference. It needs to drastically increase the availability of public housing so we can continue to meet demand and contain, manage and foster a stronger and healthier community without the knock-on effect to other areas within our community. It is an issue on which this government should be 100 per cent focused, and it is not. That is why the shadow Minister for Housing has brought this motion to this place tonight. I commend the motion.

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Gosnells) [6.28 pm]: I will make a brief contribution to this debate and support the motion moved by the member for Cockburn. There are many problems with the management of the housing portfolio in Western Australia, but I will begin by pointing out one area that is working relatively well; that is, the ministerial liaison officers who my office contacts on a frequent basis for advice about problem tenancies, positions on priority lists and other matters. That aspect appears to be working efficiently but this is in stark contrast to other areas of administration in the Department of Housing. I have heard other members touch on these areas. However, I have heard no mention of the people on the front desk in the Department of Housing. I am sure they are well intentioned but not necessarily well trained, which is a problem. I often send my constituents along to the Department of Housing to make an application to seek a listing on the priority list or to find out about something to do with the maintenance of their existing property. Often they are discouraged from putting their name on a list at all by those people at the front-of-house end and they are given inaccurate information. I do not think they get the help and support they need. That contrasts dramatically with the sort of assistance we as members of Parliament get from those ministerial liaison officers who are there to assist us. I think we could do a lot by ensuring that the people at the front desk of the Department of Housing are on a sufficient grade and are sufficiently well paid and trained to deal with often very difficult members of the public—it has to be said, people who are facing housing stress. That is just one suggestion I would like to make.

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I am concerned about this trend we have seen towards culling people from the priority list. There is obviously the temptation for a government to want to present figures that suggest that fewer and fewer people are on the priority housing list. But we cannot hide the facts. If there are really 25 000 people or in fact 40 000 people who meet all the criteria for going on the priority list, we should have that figure. We should not be doing what I suspect is happening—that is, keeping people off the list, using somewhat tricky methods to get people off the list, such as sending them letters asking if their situation has changed and if they do not respond within a certain time, their names are culled off the list. Those sorts of tricky techniques for chipping away at the list are not acceptable. It only gives us a false picture of what is really going on. We must have the facts. I am concerned that people who present to me with serious medical conditions and have children and all sorts of family responsibilities are being told they cannot go on the priority list. That seems to be a real problem. I have a couple of examples of that. One of my constituents, Mr Rabie, his wife and five children, are currently in private rental accommodation. They are in a position to pay; they are happy to pay. They live in a private rental that runs out on 26 June. They are desperate to get some form of housing. They would be happy to stay in the private rental sector if housing was available. But the problem we have is that they cannot find any private housing, so, naturally, they are turning to the public housing sector. But they are not allowed on the priority list even though they face eviction on 26 June. That is a very frightening situation for them. As I say, it is not that they do not want to pay or they cannot pay; they can afford a reasonable amount, but the housing is just not available in either the private or public sectors. That is a very difficult situation for my constituents.

I contrast that with a situation that I have been reading about—that is, the number of unoccupied private dwellings in Western Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has kindly provided some good figures on this. It seems that on census night in my electorate alone, more than 1 000 dwellings were unoccupied. I guess I am presenting to the minister something of a possible solution. If we wanted to get access to a whole lot of built housing, it is there. We need to find the right incentive mechanisms to encourage those property owners to rent out their properties. If, in my electorate, 1 000 properties are currently empty and the landlord—property owner is not inclined to rent them out, we could make a huge dent in the housing shortage problem if we could do something about that.

Dr K.D. Hames: What if they are on holiday in Bali?

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: That is an interesting point. People who have looked into this have considered that aspect.

Mr W.R. Marmion: Where did you get the 1 000 from?

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: From the ABS.

Mr W.R. Marmion: Were they vacant when they did the census?

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Yes. BIS Shrapnel has done studies on this. The Community Housing Coalition looked at this issue using the same ABS data. It is being discussed. I think the figure right across Perth that the Community Housing Coalition referenced, indicated that, on census night 2011, 66 000 homes in the Perth metropolitan area remained vacant, and that is equal to 9.6 per cent of the total housing stock. They are not 66 000 properties that belonged to people who were away on holiday, but I do need to check that. However, investment properties would have to be sifted out. There again, if an investment property is vacant for an extended period, maybe some sort of creative incentive mechanism could be used to encourage the letting of the property. In the Gosnells electorate 1 087 properties that were vacant on census night are defined as unoccupied private dwellings, so I think that rules out them belonging to people who are away on holiday.

Mr W.R. Marmion: I don't know; if there's no-one in it, there could be all sorts of reasons. The house might be being renovated, so they could have moved into another rental.

Mr A.P. Jacob: Fly in, fly out.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: I am pretty sure the ABS managed to sift out those things.

Mr W.R. Marmion: How? There's no-one there.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: They can ask what is going on in the house.

Mr W.R. Marmion: There's no-one there to ask.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: There is another element. As properties change hands, a churn goes on. I am sure that when members went doorknocking over the period leading to the election they would have found a striking number of properties that gave the appearance of being unoccupied. There is a significant issue here. I find it hard to understand, especially in a property market where there is not necessarily a high capital appreciation on a property. I think that has been the case and caused landlords to think, "Well, we'll just sit back and wait for the capital appreciation." Whereas, that is not really the case at the moment, so we would expect people who have

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invested in property to be looking to derive some sort of return on that investment, and they could do that with rentals.

Mr W.R. Marmion: I agree, because in my electorate there is a house next door to me and the owners could not be bothered renting it out. I can't believe it. There would be a percentage like that.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: For a number of reasons people are not bothering to rent them out. Property owners sometimes have bad experiences with tenants, so they think that they will not bother to rent out their properties. There is an opportunity for the government to go some way to solving this problem by giving property owners some sort of guarantee. If people on the Department of Housing priority list are desperately seeking accommodation, there could be some sort of underwriting of their ability to pay the rent, and the property being returned to the property owner in as good a condition as it was when it was first let. Using this existing infrastructure could go a long way to reducing these numbers. After all, this is a huge bonus. Instead of having to pay \$200 000 or \$300 000 to acquire land and build new properties, it would enable the government to tap into existing properties, so it could make a huge difference. It is analogous to the situation we see with commercial properties. There has been a lot of discussion about property owners not ensuring that new tenants go in, so we end up with strips of unlet premises in commercial areas and that leads to a general decline in the standard of some commercial areas. We are facing a similar situation with private properties.

However, I will stick to the issue of property owners and private landlords because all is not rosy there with the quality of housing those people are putting on the rental market. Another one of my constituents, Mr Gholan Alam, from Melvin Avenue, Thornlie, invited me over recently. He is paying \$380 a week for his rental property. I have to say that he is an excellent tenant. He, his wife and young children do a magnificent job of maintaining their property. They are good, reliable people, but I do not think the landlord is really looking after them. I can tell members why that is. First, the house is very difficult to heat, and that is becoming an issue. Of course in summer it is boiling hot as well. A real problem for them is that they had a leak and ended up with a water bill of \$942 for six months' water consumption. I have to say that this property is not let through one of the local real estate agents in my electorate. A real estate agent from another part of Perth, in the northern suburbs, has responsibility for this property, and I have to say that I think the real estate agent is doing a particularly poor job of looking after this property.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, members! There are several audible conversations going on in the chamber making it difficult for me and for the Hansard reporter to hear the member on his feet. If members have something to discuss, please leave the chamber; thank you.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: My constituents, therefore, complained to the property management company, a real estate agent from Currambine. They were not given satisfaction and they ended up with a leak that cost them \$942. That seems grossly unfair. It is not untypical to find some property owners or their representatives—property management companies—not doing the right thing by tenants and forcing them to live in premises that are very expensive. That is because in addition to rent, they have to pay for expensive heating and cooling. In fact, the quality of life in these places never really achieves an acceptable level because, even with their most expensive heating arrangements, they are still too cold even perhaps on nights like tonight. The heaters will be heating away, costing a lot of money but not achieving a decent comfort level.

Affordable housing must be around not only an acceptable rent, but also making sure that the quality of the home is acceptable. This is another issue for which the necessary incentives need to be in place to make sure that private property owners and people renting out property put onto the market a quality and acceptable standard of housing product. This is a complex issue but one that the government has had plenty of time to tackle. There has been plenty of assistance in the way of federal money when it comes to developing more public housing. I therefore support this motion. I believe that the government is definitely to be condemned for its failure in the very important housing portfolio.

MS J.M. FREEMAN (Mirrabooka) [6.42 pm]: I intended to do a dot-point presentation but I understand I can spend a bit of time on this issue. The Minister for Housing will be happy to know that I do not intend to raise the issue of lots 60 and 61 Milldale Way, because I know he is working very assiduously to resolve that issue. I note the member for Girrawheen's comments on housing developments around her electorate and the length of time these things take. Although I want to mention a couple of people, I point out that Mary Hajaji, about whom I spoke in a petition I read in the house today, is not the Mary who appeared on the news last night. I say that so that people are clear that I was not talking about the same person who is in a housing crisis.

I want to raise in this debate on the housing policy of this government that it is an issue of management. I think that the housing crisis that we are in is because the government has failed to effectively manage an important public asset. This, I think, is because the government has had a shift in focus away from delivering public housing. I note the member for Cockburn's comments about the decline in the public housing supply and

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basically the government's failure to provide public housing. I think this shift has occurred primarily since the appointment of the new director general of housing. I think the new director general sees the department's role very much in the space of selling as well as providing housing. I do not know whether we have had that debate in this place, although we have always talked about having affordable loans such as Keystart. The director general said in one document —

We are finding innovative ways to provide greater housing opportunities, particularly for those on modest incomes as well as providing quality homes ...

We know that people who pay Department of Housing rents are on very limited incomes. We know that to be eligible for social housing, a single person's income has to be less than \$28 000 a year and \$40 000 for a couple. People on modest incomes will never be able to access housing loans.

In the time I have in this place, I mostly want to talk about the department's workers. I really feel for them and the community workers who are dealing with this crisis on an ongoing basis. They have to deal with a great need, a great demand and a great stress, which must be quite difficult for them. Imagine dealing with a waitlist of 22 000 people, a four-year priority waitlist, and more than 13 000 complaints a year. The minister pointed out those figures to us yesterday. I did the maths at one stage and worked out that those people are dealing with about two or three housing complaints a day. These are just complaints that the minister brought out about behavioural issues. With a private rental market that has a vacancy rate of less than two per cent, these people are at the coalface dealing with really problematic issues in our community. The union tells me that they are doing it tough and they are doing it with limited resources. They are feeling the impact of the constant drain in trying to provide more services with fewer resources. To show that, we need go only to the "Report Arising from a Review: Tenancy management of 38/601 Wellington Street, Perth: Auditor General's Report 7 August 2010: Implementation" that the Department of Housing commissioned in October 2011 from the Applied Innovation Centre. We all know about this report as it relates to the poor gentleman, Mr Roll, who lived at the address I just mentioned. He had passed away in that house and the police estimated that his remains had lain in his unit undetected for nearly two years. The minister will know that one of the major findings of the report states —

A combination of management deficiencies, staff under-performance, high workloads, difficult and sometimes aggressive tenants, computer system and data deficiencies and lack of adequate training for staff resulted in a very serious departure from the policy that tenancy inspections must be carried out regularly.

I have heard that many of the systematic issues that were facing the department at that time are still facing the department. As outlined in the report at page 4, there is high staff turnover, a constant change in management of housing services officers, no stability in the workplace, inconsistent directions, different interpretations of what should occur and unclear policy.

I congratulate the current manager of the department's Mirrabooka office. He came into the position last year and has changed quite a bit of the procedures and processes in that office so that it is working a lot more efficiently, certainly in the responses to our questions. We were waiting a long time for responses. Now they are turning over and we are able to help people. None of those responses is particularly good. The poor manager is completely hamstrung because, even though he has some discretion when trying to meet the needs of an extreme situation, there are no houses in the region to put people in.

A gentleman in my electorate who was listed as a priority on 21 September 2012 has to live at his parents' house. His brother has recently been convicted of possession of child pornography, so the Department for Child Protection and Family Support has basically said that he cannot live with his brother in that house. He has two children and one on the way. Despite his priority listing on 21 September 2012, from April 2009 the department is currently housing only applicants with the same bedroom entitlement—which I gather is three bedrooms—and zone preference. That is three years just on the priority list, and that is not priority as far as I can see. Can members imagine what it is like for workers to deal with that? It must be completely terrible. The report gives some examples of what it would have been like to end up in such a situation as happened with Mr Roll. It states that the housing services officer who had responsibility pointed out —

... "one of the Senior Housing Officers had taken leave without any notice, and an email was sent by ...

Her manager —

to all remaining HSOs about this, stating that the phones needed to be manned for a longer length of time to cover as well as work would be delegated from this round. At the same time another Senior Housing Office was taking continuous sick leave which caused further stress on the remaining staff in the office to cover their own rounds as well as two others".

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I am told that this situation has not changed and that when people take long-term sick leave or other leave, there are no replacements, so the stress from the additional workload, including the stress of dealing with people with acute needs, is amplified. We all know that inspections are light on. That was one of the reasons the situation occurred with Mr Roll. I point out that the report states that he was not discovered for two years because the place had not been inspected for that period, despite the fact that the department was contacted three or four times by neighbouring tenants. The report goes on to state —

It is considered that the reasons for this include: unsustainable workloads—the number of properties in the round and the nature of the tenant base with an over-emphasis on dealing with rental arrears, property damage, anti-social behaviour, drug issues and so on presents a challenge.

I know that my colleagues have raised the issue of disruptive tenancies. I understand that the disruptive behaviour unit has been one way that the Department of Housing has tried to deal with that issue, and I commend the department for doing that. But, equally, it is now overworked, as I understand it. I have written to the minister about a problem tenancy in Dounley Street, Balga. The resident has duly gone through the process over the last 12 months to two years and has made reports and received reports. But the department did not investigate in a timely manner, and so the procedural justice aspect of how the disruptive behaviour unit should operate—rightly so in the 12-month period—dropped off. The neighbouring tenant has done all the right things. The disruptive behaviour unit wants to do the right things, but it just does not have the staff to deliver what is required. I note that the minister said that there is the special assistance housing program. He would know that I have a fondness for that program, having been part of setting it up when I was in the office of the Minister for Housing all those years ago, but the funding for that program has not significantly increased. The funding for the support programs that assist those tenancies has not increased.

At the end of the day, the Department of Housing is a housing provider. It is not the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and it is not the police. The departments in Victoria and New South Wales are located with the welfare or community service departments so they can connect. I know that the minister is having roundtable meetings, but meetings take time. Coordinating strategic plans takes time, particularly when people are not in the same department. This is a crisis that needs bold thinking and thinking outside the box. The minister needs to look at how he is going to deal with that. That bold thinking is not contracting out. I know that the department thought it would deal with the complaints by setting up a phone line that is housed at Mirrabooka and Elven Street, North Perth, which has some glitzy name that I cannot recall off the top of my head. Although that might seem to be an appropriate way to take incoming calls, I understand that often those calls do not get responded to for periods of time and the follow-up is not what people want. It is one thing to take a phone call; it is another thing to have the staff who can act on the phone call. We must have the people on the ground to respond to it.

One reason that housing outcomes in Western Australia have been so poorly delivered is that maintenance services have been contracted out. I understand that the principal contractor, Transfield—I always get it mixed up with Fiona Stanley Hospital and Serco—issues instructions about this time of the year that it will not pay the accounts of contractors until after 30 June so that it can stump up to the department. For pretty much the whole of June, small contractors have to hold off and then they get paid after 30 June. I have been told that unofficially. I have been told that by people who will not make complaints about it because they are contractors who know other contractors who have made complaints and lost their contracts with the Department of Housing. So they certainly will not tell the minister that. The minister needs to look at that contract. He needs to make sure that Transfield is not basically cooking the books so it looks as though it is delivering efficiency when it is not. That is certainly the case.

I also want to reflect on the impact on staff. I will talk about what happens with the staff at the Department of Housing in comparison with what happens with commercial agents. Page 27 of the report outlines that commercial agents manage about 100 properties at any one time and make inspections about four times a year, which is 400 inspections; whereas HSOs are expected to do about 800 inspections, manage twice as many properties and have clientele who cause them to attend their properties more often. The report states —

This form of housing caters for a clientele which, for a large range of reasons, find it impossible to secure other forms of housing. In a brief discussion with a senior member of staff, it was estimated that about 15% (and it is growing) of tenants could be considered “problem tenants”. These tenants may be in arrears on their rent, the subject of a complaint, they may have mental health issues and so on. There is a multiplier effect in terms of workload. The Department is required to allocate a proportion of allocations to priority clients, increasing the multiplier.

The HSOs who are at the coalface are really doing it tough. That is a real problem for a government that is looking for ways to deliver more with fewer resources.

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I will finish by talking about how it impacts on community housing workers. One community housing worker attended the community housing forum that was organised prior to the election. The member for Cannington, who was then the opposition housing spokesperson, attended. The worker said, in a very moving way, that every week he saw two or three people who were homeless. He said that people were now begging for tents. They are begging for tents because they have nowhere to live! They are begging for somewhere to live so that they can sustain their livelihoods. That is not something we can give them, because we have an expectation that we will not have shanty towns in Perth. The government may have levelled lots 60 and 61, but it has put a little ditch in the area and around the corner, so I have my own version of a shanty town. It gets moved on every now and again, but it is a pretty good space if it does not rain too much. These tents can be put up for people to live in, so at least the Department of Housing is providing them with land on which to put up these tents for a number of families in the area who are homeless.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

House adjourned at 7.00 pm
