

GOVERNMENT REGIONAL OFFICERS' HOUSING — MUNGLINUP

Grievance

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [9.07 am]: I thank the Minister for Housing for taking my grievance on the Munglinup Primary School. After more than five years of lobbying, the Munglinup community was assured that it would be provided with much-needed housing through the Government Regional Officers' Housing scheme. A block of land in Munglinup was bought from the Shire of Ravensthorpe for \$19 800 in December 2020. Despite the Department of Education agreeing with the community regarding the need to build additional accommodation for teachers in the town, that block of land sits vacant. Years and months of promises by this government have come to nothing.

Munglinup's need for a second house for its teaching staff was recognised by the Shire of Ravensthorpe, which allocated 17 Budjan Street, Munglinup, for that purpose and committed to helping with construction. Approval for the build came from the Department of Education in July 2019, and GROH advised it was commencing construction works in August 2021. Since that time, the community has received communications that have talked of delays in work due to factors including shortages of materials and labour, and changes in design. Although the project delivery date was pushed out, the community was constantly assured that it was still in progress. The April 2023 delivery date changed to August 2023. However, in April this year, just before bringing down its 2023 budget, the state government advised the community that it would not be getting the house for its teachers. The promised building will be going to a goldfields community instead, and the Munglinup community will have to make do. To rub salt into the wound, this government set aside an extra \$61.6 million for GROH housing in the 2023–24 budget.

Its principal is accommodated in the only Government Regional Officers' Housing house allocated to teaching staff in the town, and other Munglinup Primary School teaching staff are currently commuting to the school. One teacher makes a 160-kilometre return drive from Cascades to the primary school five days per week—a total of 800 kilometres per week. Other staff drive 108 kilometres in the morning and 108 kilometres in the afternoon to travel to the school from Esperance; that is 216 kilometres a day or 1 080 kilometres a week. The Munglinup community is genuinely concerned about the impact of travel on staff occupational health and safety. Early mornings on the road to ensure they are ready to work at eight o'clock mean teaching staff are travelling gravel roads and a highway frequented by trucks and kangaroos. Road closures due to heavy rains can impact on the ability of staff to get to and from school. Those are all factors that influence teachers' abilities to do their jobs well.

As Munglinup Community Group member Marnie Lawrence says —

Travelling is not appealing and does not help the community's plight in terms of attracting permanent teaching staff.

She says that neither teaching staff with families nor individuals will come when no housing is available, and that having teachers' accommodation for staff members at Munglinup would be an incentive to encourage them to come and teach “our children at our beautiful school”.

In 2019, the Department of Education advised the Munglinup Community Group that it agreed there was a need for an additional house in Munglinup, saying that it had asked for a four-bedroom house to be provided as part of the GROH program. It said the house would be suitable for a family or single teachers working at Munglinup. The Department of Education shared the community's concern regarding the long daily commutes being faced by Munglinup teachers. Despite the recognition of that need, the Department of Housing has reneged on its promise of a building that would meet the need. It is the lack of forward planning and thinking that has long-term implications. Although only nine students currently attend the small school, 11 students are enrolled for 2024 and five are entering kindy. With 24 children currently attending the playgroup, the primary school needs to be prepared to educate the next generation.

Schools are a critical part of rural communities and an integral part of any employment package offered to young families considering moving to regional areas and agriculture-based employment. Young parents want their children to have access to a good education that can and should be offered to them in their communities. The teachers entrusted with the task of delivering that education need to be housed. The community is genuinely concerned about the profound impact of the decision not to deliver a new teacher's house.

The impact has been recognised by the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, which has expressed concern, especially considering the nationwide teacher shortage that is making it harder to source teachers for small rural schools. As Marnie Lawrence said, it is hard for someone to become part of the community where they work if they do not live there, and being part of a community is —

... important for mental health and wellbeing and allowing for networking, camaraderie and establishing lifelong friendships.

Parents in the Munglinup community feel like they are living in a region that is undervalued and worth less than their metropolitan counterparts. I can understand why they must feel that way. After years of work and empty promises, they must feel like they have been abandoned. People in that area know they are part of a remote yet highly productive farming community that deserves its fair share of resources. As parents, they feel strongly about securing a high-quality primary school education for their children. They see that not only as a priority but also as a basic right. It is a shame that they have been let down, and I call on the government and the minister to reconsider their decision not to honour a commitment made and deliver on the promise that has been broken.

MR J.N. CAREY (Perth — Minister for Housing) [9.13 am]: I thank the member for his grievance. I would like to put the Government Regional Officers' Housing process and system on the record because the member appears to outline a fundamental misunderstanding.

I do not know whether that approach is deliberate, because he included some incredible clichés in his speech. That book of clichés—"it's come to nothing" and "empty promises"—is the Nationals WA playbook, and it is wrong. I know the member for Roe has done this before, and I put that on the record. We remember in this Parliament that he raised the incident of a vacant social house that he said should have been used for other purposes. What he failed to mention, either deliberately or mistakenly, was that the tenant was away assisting a family member at the time. The member for Roe came into this Parliament to complain about a vacant social house. We have seen that on more than one occasion by the opposition—failed informed discussion. The member for Roe does it repeatedly, and he did it at that time.

Firstly, I will outline the allocation and delivery process for GROH housing. Client agencies such as the Western Australia Police Force and the Department of Education go to the Department of Communities to outline how many properties they need in the regions. Once these agencies have come to the department, the department can then allocate GROH properties where there is demand. I want to be clear about that. The Department of Communities is not responsible for determining demand. As people are aware, we gave an additional funding allocation of \$61.6 million in this area, taking our total contribution to around \$180 million. As I reported previously, GROH is a demand-driven program. The opposition criticises vacant housing and says, "Use it for other purposes." I do not know or seek to speak about the workforce in this situation, but sometimes there is a misalignment between the town's aspirations and the circumstances of the workforce at the time. GROH homes in small towns often remain vacant for a long time. That is a fact. Staff choose to travel in from or out of another town or even a regional centre that better suits their needs as an individual or a family unit. That is their right.

The Department of Communities consulted the Department of Education about the needs in Munglinup prior to making the decision not to proceed in the town at this time. The Department of Education has advised that the primary school currently has a total of eight students across all school years. There is an existing GROH property in Munglinup, and I am advised that the property sat vacant for over a year between November 2021 and April 2023. I put that on the record. It now temporarily houses an acting staff member. Once the acting period is over, that property will be available for incoming education staff. I am advised that it may sit empty for a period of time. That property meets current GROH standards and the advice is clear that a new build is not needed at this time. The Department of Communities will retain and land bank the vacant block like we do in many areas, including metro Perth. It is always open to reviewing the holding of the site should the Department of Education advise that GROH expansion is required. It is not uncommon that my agency holds a number of lots across metro Perth and regional areas so that we can build at the right time.

Notwithstanding everything I have said, plans are in place to renovate and upgrade the existing house. Let us be clear: the Department of Education has advised the Department of Communities that it does not have an immediate need for GROH in the community. The Department of Communities sought advice from other agencies and there is no demand from other agencies in the town. That increases the risk that not only the existing GROH property but also an additional GROH property may sit vacant for extended periods. With ongoing demand for housing across Western Australia, the program has never allocated funds to projects when there is no confirmed need or there is a probability of properties remaining vacant for an extended period.

The Department of Communities has not been advised of any confirmed increase in teaching numbers nor school expansion by the Department of Education. The facts are resolutely clear. I have seen the member —

Mr P.J. Rundle: So, you're comfortable those teachers can drive 1 000 kilometres a week?

Mr J.N. CAREY: The member should not be rude and interrupt like he usually does. The member for Roe has a long history of getting his facts wrong. He has done it with social housing. He attacks us on other vacant housing. This is the reality: we have a member of Parliament who is just not informed on the basics.

Mr P.J. Rundle: This is the community of Munglinup.

Mr J.N. CAREY: He does a disservice to his electorate because he is misinformed. He comes into this Parliament and makes claims that are wrong. It is proven, and he does not even apologise for his mistakes and misinformation

to this Parliament. The audacity of him! The audacity! He does his electorate no service when he gets basic facts wrong. Our government has made an additional investment into Government Regional Officers' Housing, and we are proceeding with that investment, making housing decisions when there is clear need that is advised by those agencies. That is the course of action we are taking and is the appropriate course of action.