

EAST KIMBERLEY — REMOTE COMMUNITIES — SERVICES

Statement

HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [9.45 pm]: I rise to give a statement about some communities that I visited over the last few weeks. Parliament had a bit of a break and I am sure that many members got out and talked to their community over that time. For five of my colleagues and me, our region is very big. I travelled approximately 9 000 kilometres and visited 16 remote and regional communities over two weeks. When I visited a couple of remote communities in the East Kimberley, their leadership and the community at large asked me to bring their difficult circumstances to the attention of people in Perth, and particularly this place. They asked me to speak up for them, because they often feel that they are not heard on some of the challenges they face. Many of my colleagues on both sides of the house would be aware of the challenges that remote Aboriginal communities face. The two communities I will speak about are Kundat Djaru and Mulan. They reside in the Tjurabalan lands in the East Kimberley, not far from Tanami Road and Duncan Road. That is where they are. Kundat Djaru is also known as Ringer Soak. It is also encompassed by the Djaru traditional lands. It is located north of a recently established critical minerals mine. Mulan is located at the famous Lake Gregory, or Paraku, which is a unique semi-fresh lake that goes into the Tanami Desert.

People who have visited remote communities know some of the challenges of isolation, being cut off due to weather events and issues with road safety. Some serious issues were raised with me at a community meeting in Kundat Djaru at which we met with both the leadership and the community at large. One issue was the lack of a community office. It is difficult for community members to access services such as Centrelink, as those services have gone more online and the homes in those communities often do not have internet connections. The community relies on community offices for connection. The community offices in Kundat Djaru and Mulan are no longer in operation. It is the same problem in Mulan because, in the words of the community, there seems to be more of a service provision for drive-in drive-out and fly-in fly-out, and over time the offices have fallen into disrepair due to the inability of organisations to maintain that service. That is something they would really like to see, so those community members could have access. At the moment they rely for assistance on the school, as part of Catholic education in that community, and the shop.

I turn to overcrowding and housing. I commend the government for putting some funding into remote housing. That is very important, but I think more can be done about overcrowding and community housing. There were also concerns about the delays in getting maintenance done, the loss of an ambulance and the lack of accommodation for tradespeople who come into town. Often the tradies end up sleeping at the arts centre. The most challenging issue for the people at Kundat Djaru is the loss of staff and the challenges of getting staff into the health clinic. Very sadly, before I visited, there was a loss of a community member. The first responders were community members. That left that community quite traumatised. They were challenged by that issue. In some ways I feel inadequate bringing this up but they asked me to raise these issues because they would like to see more effort put into employing permanent staff in those areas, notwithstanding some of the challenges of getting staff into remote areas. I was warmly welcomed by the community. Over 20 people were in attendance. I thanked them for their welcome and the hospitality they extended to me at that time.

I would like to talk about Mulan, which is a slightly smaller community. It probably has about 40 residents. It has similar issues, including the time it takes to do any maintenance on housing. When we met outside the community store, the comment was that it has been decades since any major maintenance was done on those homes. Some of the community members are employed. They say they pay quite high rent. A figure of \$500 a week was quoted. I do not know how the rental schemes operate within the Department of Communities. They felt they were not getting value for the outcomes they needed—to live in conditions that we would expect in Perth. In the community of Mulan, there was an issue with a generator located in the town centre, which made quite a bit of noise. They said it would be great if they could move to sustainable energy or renewable energy. There was also concern about food spoilage when the community store was run by Outback Stores and there were sometimes power cuts for an hour or more. Food security is a big challenge. We discussed the fact that during the flood events in the Kimberley there was a lack of fresh vegetables for some time. It was challenging to ensure that everyone had a balanced diet at that time. These are the challenges.

I encourage the government to continue to invest more into remote communities. We need to do more because it is one of the most challenging environments. Again, the issue of the community office came up. I was asked to take some photos and put them on Facebook. It is not a pretty sight. It was damaged. They wanted to get the message out there. It is very difficult for communities to maintain those offices when they do not have the resources for staff. They spoke of the importance of having one base in the community where people can go to access basic services online or seek help to negotiate some issue with the Department of Transport or whatever, dealing with the day-to-day things that we take for granted when we go online at home or walk down to the post office and get things sorted. These are the challenges faced by people in remote communities.

In closing, I know that Mulan also raised the issue around its airstrip and the fact that the Royal Flying Doctor Service cannot land there at night. A little while ago, someone had an emergency and they had to drive to Balgo to get it resolved, so these are the challenges. Access to emergency services, health services and housing is vital. I was there during reconciliation week, and I note that the wonderful theme of reconciliation week was for us all to be a voice to generations and make sure that when we meet people who are maybe not as advantaged as us, through their physical or historical circumstances, we should speak up. I have undertaken, at their urging, to speak up tonight.