



Speech by

**Hon. Warren Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

Hansard Tuesday, 6 June 2006

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## COMMUNITY SERVICES BILL

**Hon. FW PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (Minister for Communities, Disability Services and Seniors) (12.28 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

Most Queenslanders will use community services in one form or another at some stage in their lives. To assist in the delivery of these vital services, the Department of Communities currently provides funding under the Family Services Act 1987 to approximately 860 community organisations.

The majority of funded community organisations are not-for-profit incorporated associations. However, in terms of size, structure and service location, they vary widely. They include large statewide and national organisations, small locally based organisations, parents and citizens groups under the auspices of schools, Indigenous non-government organisations and local governments.

Funding provided by the Department of Communities to these organisations ranges from hundreds of dollars to more than \$2 million. In 2005-06, the department's investment in community organisations totalled more than \$150 million. These organisations provide a range of services from neighbourhood centres, community safety services and support for seniors, young people and homeless people, through to services in areas such as youth justice, and domestic and family violence prevention.

The development of new legislation for community services has been a key initiative of the Strengthening Non-Government Organisations Strategy. It is a fundamental part of this government's commitment to building strong communities and improving the quality of life for all Queenslanders wherever they live.

Strengthening non-government organisations has been one of my top priorities since coming to the portfolio. No-one in this House could fail to appreciate the vital role that community organisations play in helping to maintain the wellbeing of Queensland communities. These organisations are in an ideal position to deliver many services because they are close to their local communities and can harness community strengths and resources.

We must ensure the systems and processes for giving these organisations assistance are supported by clear, comprehensive and contemporary legislation. No significant changes have been made to the funding sections of the Family Services Act since it took effect 19 years ago. The Community Services Bill provides a contemporary legal foundation for providing the best possible community services by giving greater transparency and certainty about how the Department of Communities gives funding and other assistance to community organisations. It also provides greater security that services will meet the needs of Queenslanders and help to build sustainable communities.

The proposed new legislation is also intended to be consistent with other laws affecting the delivery of human services. It was with great pleasure that I recently tabled important new disability services legislation. The new Disability Services Act continues the important reforms initiated by this government to provide a legislative base for strengthened consumer safeguards, service standards, accountability and monitoring mechanisms.

The new Community Services Bill furthers this important reform process and aligns the legislation underpinning the delivery of government assisted community services with other key parts of the human services sector, such as housing and disability services. This alignment brings significant benefits to both community organisations and the clients of services provided by these organisations.

Organisations which receive funding or other assistance from more than one government department will have greater certainty and consistency in relation to the expectations and decision-making processes. The Community Services Bill also contains a consistent framework for ensuring the quality and accountability of services provided with government assistance.

I am pleased to say this bill has the broad support of the community services sector. Extensive consultation on the Strengthening NGOs Strategy initiatives, which are supported by the bill, occurred through statewide information and engagement sessions in August to October 2005. In addition, the department undertook consultation on a draft bill in April and May this year, via the Queensland government's ConsultQld web site.

Targeted regional forums were attended by key representative organisations and local governments funded by the department in every Department of Communities region across the state. These included a diverse cross-section of community organisations from remote, regional and metropolitan locations, and included Indigenous managed organisations.

I would like to thank those members of community organisations and peak organisations who took the opportunity to have their say on a consultation draft of the bill. Their insights, experience and knowledge helped shape the bill that I introduce into parliament today.

I will now turn to the key parts of the bill. The object of the bill is to help build sustainable communities by facilitating access by Queenslanders to community services. The bill has seven principles, which clarify how the department and community organisations can work together to provide quality services for Queenslanders.

The department's expectations about what organisations should do to become eligible for assistance are not clear under the Family Services Act. To clarify and streamline these requirements, the bill outlines a process for organisations to follow to become 'approved service providers'. Exemptions to the approval process may apply in urgent cases or for one-off grants.

A number of organisations which have received funding from the department over a number of years have asked whether they will need to 'start from scratch' and resubmit information already lodged with the department. I am pleased to clarify that under the transitional arrangements set out in the bill, community organisations which are currently receiving funding from the department will automatically be deemed to be approved service providers.

The development of standards for community services is another key initiative of the Strengthening Non-Government Organisations Strategy. The standards are currently being implemented across the sector. They cover a range of matters, including accessibility of services, safety and wellbeing of service users, and financial management and accountability. The standards set out minimum expectations of services provided with assistance from the department and provide consistent benchmarks for service delivery across the sector.

The bill provides for standards to be prescribed in a regulation to help ensure high-quality, safe and accountable services are provided to the community. The Standards Regulation will not commence immediately, to enable the standards to be implemented in stages. This approach will ensure community organisations have sufficient time to develop and implement practices before they are required to comply with the requirements of the legislation.

The main aim of this proposed new legislation is to ensure the provision of sustainable, quality, safe, responsive and accountable services acquired through the provision of public funds. The vast majority of services delivered by Queensland's community organisations are of a high standard. Staff and volunteers are dedicated and committed to delivering the best possible services to the community.

In most cases, concerns about service delivery are identified and resolved cooperatively between the funded organisation and the department. However, in the small number of cases where serious concerns about service delivery are raised, such as financial mismanagement or client abuse, the community expects that the department will act in an efficient and timely way. The current Family Services Act does not support a proactive or tailored approach to achieve this. Therefore, the bill has been designed to provide progressively stronger measures to allow the department to investigate and remedy concerns. When there are no other workable options, the bill also enables an interim manager to be appointed by the department to administer services provided by an organisation using departmental assistance.

I am pleased to say that during consultation the sector voiced its support for remedial measures that give the government the ability to respond effectively to situations where there are serious concerns. I thank the sector for its support of this important feature for protecting the interests of vulnerable clients and the integrity of public funds.

Importantly, the proposed legislation will not commence until the department and the sector have systems and practices in place to support implementation. It is proposed that the new laws will commence by the end of 2006. During this time, a number of key strengthening non-government organisations strategies will be rolled out to support the sector and to ensure alignment with the new legislation.

I would again like to recognise the great job that community organisations do in providing valuable community based services to Queenslanders every day. This bill will help government and community organisations work together to meet modern community and accountability expectations. The Community Services Bill is essential to achieving the government's vision of safe, valued and empowered communities. I commend the bill to the House.