



Speech by

Evan Moorhead

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Hansard Tuesday, 7 August 2007

COMMUNITY SERVICES BILL

Mr MOORHEAD (Waterford—ALP) (6.25 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Community Services Bill 2007. The Community Services Bill 2007 will ensure that community services funded by the state government will continue to be of a high quality, relevant and flexible to local communities while also ensuring that taxpayers' hard-earned dollars are spent in an accountable and transparent way.

What this bill and its predecessor legislation have recognised is that, with a little financial assistance, communities can deliver some support services as well if not better than government. Funding local community based organisations can mean that support is tailored to local needs and delivered in a way that is appropriate for local communities. While I am a strong supporter of government services, governments must take the opportunity to support community based services where they can build strong services and stronger communities. Funded properly, delivering community support through community based organisations builds more resilient communities.

Building stronger communities and delivering community services is not simply a matter of financial support or a matter of changing legislation. The state government's Strengthening Non-Government Organisations Strategy brings together a renewed legislative framework and strong financial support. But just as importantly the strategy also provides support for clear and transparent accounting systems, support through a one-stop shop web site, support in collaboration with community organisations, and support for workforce development. I know the word 'holistic' is one that is overused in politics as well as in departments, but this is one strategy that is holistic and takes every opportunity to support strong community services and strong community organisations. What must be realised is that most of the community services supported by this legislation are built on volunteer support either through volunteers delivering services or through volunteer management committee members.

For management committees of community based organisations funded under the current legislation, I appreciate the need for legislation to make the management of community based organisations a clear and transparent process. While most people who volunteer their time in community based organisations are not accountants, we are expected to ensure that taxpayer grants are being spent appropriately and lawfully. The process to move to the standard charter of accounts has made accounting to the Department of Communities a simpler task not only for members of the management committee but also for the hardworking staff who have to prepare the accounts.

It is important that we make community services funding available to locally based community organisations. There has been a worrying trend in recent years for funding to be directed towards large institutional charities rather than local community organisations. It is important that the funding decisions give consideration to the substantial community benefit of funding community based organisations rather than large organisations or private sector providers.

The Strengthening Non-Government Organisations Strategy will also support workforce development amongst the community sector workforce. This is an important initiative to support the invaluable staff members who deliver community services. Many of these workers, the face of community service delivery, are working more for love than money. Also, working in generally small organisations means that career paths are often limited. Unfortunately, this has often led to high levels of turnover.

Workforce development opportunities such as skill recognition, education and career path options will go a long way to provide career options for community service workers. Community service workers not only work above and beyond the call of duty but often have jobs that take significant emotional energy. Career development will assist not only in providing job satisfaction but also in reducing turnover, allowing that important corporate knowledge and experience to stay within community organisations.

It is important that the legislation which provides the framework for the delivery of funding community services is relevant and up to date. Community services in my electorate are essential in delivering such needed services. This includes domestic violence services, disability support and respite services, and the funding of community outreach in community and neighbourhood centres. As the minister has said, most people will use the service of a state government funded community service even though they may not realise it.

If you have attended the Beenleigh Neighbourhood Centre and participated in one of Lucretia Suci's cooking groups you have benefited from a state government funded community service. If a local father or partner has attended the Youth and Family Service (Logan City) Men's Domestic Violence Counselling Service, they have accessed a state government funded community service. If a family has been able to avoid interaction with the Department of Child Safety because of the support of Lifeline and the Referral for Active Intervention Services, they have benefited from state government funded community services. These are but a few of the important services funded by the Department of Communities.

While the Family Services Act 1987 has served us well, this bill will bring the legislative framework up to date with the services needed by the communities of 2007. Part 3 of the bill introduces streamlined processes to provide for preapproval processes for service providers to become eligible to receive assistance. Corporations, which include incorporated associations, will be able to apply to the chief executive to become an approved service provider. The chief executive will need to have regard to a number of factors, including the financial records and the appropriate corporate governance of the association or incorporated body.

Under part 13 those organisations which are currently service providers are deemed to be approved service providers and, importantly, the decision process for approval will be quick and effective with a decision required within 90 days after the application is received. Part 9, in particular clause 92, allows for the decisions of the chief executive to be reviewed through internal review and ultimately to the Commercial and Consumer Tribunal.

Part 4 of the bill will also make clear the funding process and how funding agreements are to be developed. Clause 28 makes clear what is required to be contained in a funding agreement. This agreement based regime will make it clear what is expected of community organisations and what community organisations must do to fulfil their obligations. This clarity of funding arrangements will only be further enhanced with the provisions of part 2 which will allow the minister to issue standards for how community organisations go about spending taxpayers' money. That is what this bill is about: balancing the need to provide financial support to community organisations with the need to make sure that taxpayers' money is being spent in an appropriate way and can be accounted for. But this is not always what occurs.

Community based organisations can be divided or otherwise dysfunctional, meaning that community services can be disrupted. This bill provides a strong compliance regime to ensure financial accountability. Officers of the department are provided with the rights to monitor and enforce agreements. The chief executive officer will be able to issue compliance and show-cause notices in response to breaches of funding agreements. Failure to comply with this process will allow the chief executive to suspend or stop assistance or recover unspent funds.

My view is that the enforcement regime is an important part of getting balance between flexibility and accountability. This is particularly the case when seen in the context of the cooperative approach that I have experienced when dealing with the officers of the Department of Communities. I congratulate the minister on bringing this bill before the House and I commend the bill.