



Speech by

Karen Struthers

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

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COMMUNITY SERVICES BILL

Ms STRUTHERS (Algester—ALP) (3.25 pm): We can be very proud of the high standard of community service delivery in Queensland. All of us at some time in our lives will have cause to use a community service—an aged-care service, a youth service, a mental health service, a diabetes support service and many others. I support the Community Services Bill as it aims to strengthen and formalise the relationship between the state government and service providers, ultimately aiming to improve public accountability for the funds expended and improve the quality of services delivered. The bill promotes very positive guiding principles for the relationship between funder and service provider. It emphasises that the department and service providers should work together to meet common aims in a way that recognises each other's autonomy, contributions and accountabilities.

NGOs are not agents of government, and that is a really critical point. Sometimes they are looked upon because they get government funding as agents of government, but that is not the case. They are independent entities, and this relationship must be respected and is being respected in what I have seen of the bill. Similarly, governments have a public duty to monitor service delivery as well as provide appropriate levels of funding and support to NGOs. NGOs are often dealing with some of the most vulnerable people in our community or those at a vulnerable time in their lives, so it is critical that governments do take full responsibility and make sure that services are providing a good quality service.

The Community Services Bill provides a much clearer legal foundation for the funding that is given. I am certainly very pleased that under successive Labor governments we have seen significant improvements in not only funding to community services but also the relationship between government and service providers has improved significantly over past decades. I was a social worker through the eighties and part of the nineties and I witnessed how, particularly under conservative governments, Queensland consistently rated as the state with one of the lowest per capita spends on community and social services. I worked in services that ran on the smell of an oily rag because we were unable to get adequate government funding. It has certainly been refreshing under successive Labor governments to see the way in which the community services sector has been valued, and I know that the minister has commanded a lot of respect from services around the state for the way in which he has shown utmost respect for community services. I commend him for that and commend him for the work that he has done in the development of the bill.

I am absolutely delighted that the 2007-08 budget is one of the best ever seen in this state, particularly in its unprecedented allocations of funding to mental health, disability services and key areas like housing. The increased funding and more recent projects such as the Strengthening NGOs project has meant that, in my view and from what I am hearing from colleagues in the non-government sector, the NGO sector is better placed than ever to provide services and to meet the responsibilities that it has to the public. When we talk about community services we are talking about a massive industry when we look at all of it together. Across Queensland we are talking about over 1,800 services with an expenditure of well over \$2,000 million. Around 70 per cent of the revenue is funded by government, and 70 per cent to 80 per cent of that cost is actually staff costs. There are a lot of people employed—some 41,000 or so—in the voluntary sector across Queensland. It is very important that they account for every cent of that to the

public through the government mechanisms that we have, and it is pleasing to see the improvements in this bill.

I remember my first meeting with the now Deputy Premier, Anna Bligh, in about 1989 when a number of us in services were having problems with a particular service and we did not know what to do about it. The department that was funding all of us seemed to be unable to intervene because of a lack of clarity in its legislative responsibilities and I guess it was wanting to be a bit hands off.

So we called in the ever-capable Anna Bligh to come and help mediate. She was showing leadership skills then and she is showing strong leadership skills now. She is just getting better. It was a difficult time for us, because we wanted to improve the service performance of a peer service and it was very difficult. We did not want to go public about them; we wanted to try to work with them. I do not think that we ever really resolved those issues, but this bill allows processes along the way with the approved service provider mechanisms and the show cause mechanisms. There is a lot more in this bill that will provide clarity to people about how to go about dealing with services that are nonperforming or are a problem. I certainly see a lot of improvements here from times gone by.

I know that organisations that I used to work with such as QCOSS and other big NGOs such as ACROD have been working together to get the government to develop more of a compact with services. I am not sure where progress is at on those sorts of developments that they have been seeking. But it certainly makes good sense to have a very clear understanding of each other's roles and to respect each other's independence. From what I have seen of this bill and from my understanding of the provisions within this bill, we are certainly going a long way forward to improve that relationship and show the respect to each other that we deserve.

So I say well done, Minister. As I said earlier, he has commanded a lot of respect. That is very important when we are dealing with organisations that are dealing with vulnerable people. It is so important that we not only have a good relationship but also show compassion to the consumers of those services through appropriate funding and proper mechanisms and relationships. That is certainly what seems to be happening across the state.