

Social and Welfare Services

Social Worker

- 9.1 A full-time social worker is employed by the Indian Ocean Territories Health Service to provide welfare services to both Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands. The Department of Transport and Regional Services has a service delivery arrangement with the Western Australian Department for Community Development (DCD) under which the social worker is provided with professional supervision, support, consultancy and ongoing professional development.¹ The social worker, who spends ten days on Cocos (Keeling) Islands every nine weeks or so, is assisted by a community services officer based on those islands.²
- 9.2 The then social worker for the Indian Ocean Territories, Ms Dianne Wood, submitted that there was such demand for the social work that a part-time position should be established on Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Ms Wood stated:

Issues dealt with range from marriage guidance, sexual assault, child abuse, eating disorders...depression, mediation...monitoring of people on community service orders...support for the disabled...visa applications...and much, much more. I also run group sessions for parenting programs...and I am either organising various groups such as the Women's Well-being Group or I am on committees that support local people such as the Youth Group.³

1 Department of Transport and Regional Services, Submissions, p. 53.

2 Ms Dianne Wood, Submissions, p. 252.

3 Ms Dianne Wood, Submissions, p. 251.

It would be beneficial if a 0.5 social work position could be created on Cocos as there is a considerable amount of work there. The senior social worker on Christmas Island could provide the supervision.⁴

The DCD reported in its performance report on the service delivery arrangement that there was a need for increased social work services on Cocos (Keeling) Islands.⁵

Recommendation 14

- 9.3 That the Department of Transport and Regional Services establish a part-time social worker position for the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.**

Centrelink Services - Cocos (Keeling) Islands

- 9.4 The Cocos Islands Co-operative Society Ltd is currently the agent for Centrelink on Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Until November 2002 the Shire provided the service, but apparently was dissatisfied with the remuneration paid by Centrelink. The Co-op advised that:

Centrelink put out an expression of interest to the island and when they got no responses they rang us at the co-op and we could see that if we did not do something it was going to go.⁶

- 9.5 Mr Knight, the Co-op Chairman, noted that it was financially difficult for the Co-op to continue providing the service, but considered that it had no choice because it was such a vital community service.⁷ Mr Knight stated that:

...it is almost a contract not worth doing...we are getting paid \$7000 a quarter...which basically covers the wages, and...another \$27 a week to cover our postage, electricity and profits. However, if we did not pick it up, the local community, especially the Cocos

4 Ms Dianne Wood, Submissions, p. 251.

5 Department of Transport and Regional Services, *Service Delivery Arrangements [SDA] Performance Reports 2001/2002*, p. 7.

6 Mr Alan O'Grady, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 112.

7 Mr Signa Knight, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 106.

Malay community, would have no option but to try to talk to someone in Perth about not only employment opportunities but other social security matters. Their language is slightly different from Indonesian and Malay. So I would anticipate that they would have real problems trying to communicate with a Centrelink interpreter in Perth.⁸

- 9.6 Mr Robin Salvage, National Manager, Business, Rural and Rent Assistance for Centrelink, noted that the agency on Cocos (Keeling) Islands is:

at the lower end in terms of traffic through that particular agency in comparison to many other agencies. In our reviews of those arrangements we have indicated that we think the amount [paid to the agency] should be less.⁹

Mr Salvage noted, however, that Centrelink had decided that there were special issues relating to language and isolation in the islands and that it would continue to maintain payments at the current level of \$28,500 per annum.¹⁰ Centrelink was keeping the matter under review. Mr Salvage also informed the Committee that Centrelink intended to increase the rates paid to agents by five per cent in 2003-2004.¹¹

- 9.7 The Committee considers that the presence of a Centrelink agent on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands is essential if residents are to be afforded services at the same levels as are available to comparable communities on the mainland. If it were to become necessary the Committee would recommend that the service be subsidised directly by the Commonwealth to the extent that was practicable to maintain the service.

Children and Youth Support Services and Recreational Facilities

- 9.8 The Service Delivery Arrangement performance report of the Western Australian Department for Community Development concluded that the development of youth services in the Indian Ocean Territories was an issue that requires “ongoing consideration and/or action”.¹² The

8 Mr Signa Knight, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 106.

9 Mr Robin Salvage, Transcript, 12 May 2003, p. 257.

10 Mr Robin Salvage, Transcript, 12 May 2003, p. 258.

11 Mr Robin Salvage, Transcript, 12 May 2003, p. 258.

12 Department of Transport and Regional Services, *Service Delivery Arrangements [SDA] Performance Reports 2001/2002*, p. 7.

Christmas Island Shire Council pointed out that both “childcare services and youth programs on CI are lacking and, with the increase in population, needs to be addressed”.¹³

- 9.9 At the time of the Committee’s visit in March 2003, there were no formal childcare facilities in the Indian Ocean Territories. There were informal play groups in both Territories, and there were plans to establish a licensed childcare facility on Christmas Island. The Department of Transport and Regional Services noted that:

\$85,000 was committed in the [2001-2002] financial year to establish a childcare facility within the neighbourhood centre. The renovations to the centre include the conversion of the social worker’s office into an infants’ care area and the establishment of a new office for the social worker within the centre. These changes with minor renovations to the existing facilities should enable it to be licensed for use as a registered childcare facility. The work for the new office for the social worker is near complete, but works for the renovations to the day-care rooms are waiting on materials - delayed because of delays to shipping. Most materials are now on-Island and work is expected to be completed near end August 2003.¹⁴

Youth Groups- Christmas Island

- 9.10 On Christmas Island Mrs Elizabeth Sorrenson, Mrs Julie Coloquhoun and other parent volunteers run a weekly youth group, the Christmas Island Youth Coordination Group (also known as Club HI), which meets at the neighbourhood centre on Friday evenings. The group offers a venue where young people aged thirteen and over from all cultures represented on the island can come together, socialise and play games in a supervised environment.¹⁵
- 9.11 The Commonwealth owns the neighbourhood centre that is used by the youth group for five hours a week. The Department of Transport and Regional Services is responsible for the building’s upkeep and it had begun charging rent to users as part of its ‘normalisation’ policy. This rent has to be met from Club HI’s fundraising activities in the small island community.

13 Shire of Christmas Island, Submissions, p. 331.

14 Information provided by the Department of Transport and Regional Services.

15 Mrs Elizabeth Sorrenson, Transcript, 11 March 2003, p. 70.

- 9.12 Mrs Sorrenson informed the Committee that the club enjoyed community support, which included fundraising efforts and donations of second hand equipment, but that it had experienced difficulties in obtaining government assisted funding. The funds were needed for the following purposes:

Our immediate concerns are:

Payment of rent in 2003, payment and securing of public liability, payment of electricity accounts, water rates and cleaning common areas.

Our ongoing requirements include:

Replacement of furniture that was retrieved from the rubbish tip, paint for walls, storage cupboards and other general furnishings, replacement of donated equipment and computers.

On our wish list would be:

A paid coordinator able to direct teenagers for activities organise outdoor activities and one off events away from the venue.¹⁶

- 9.13 Following the group's representations, the Department of Transport and Regional Services was able to inform the Committee that the long-term rental for the neighbourhood centre had been reduced by 40 per cent from the valuation the Department had obtained, to \$1800 per annum, that a rent holiday had been given for 2002, and that rent in 2003 would be \$900.¹⁷ The Department also reported that the group had received two government grants – one of \$15,760 for the development of a musical program and to support its activities as a youth group and another of \$34,500 for the employment of a youth worker.¹⁸

- 9.14 The Committee welcomes the decisions to award grants to the youth group and wishes them well. The Committee also acknowledges the decision to reduce the rent payable on the premises used by the group. However, the Committee is perplexed as to why there is a policy that requires non-profit community groups to pay rent at all.

Recommendation 15

- 9.15 **That the Federal Government exempt non-profit community groups**

16 Mrs Elizabeth Sorrenson, Submissions, p. 257.

17 Mr Andrew Wilson, Transcript, 12 May 2003, p. 250.

18 Mr Andrew Wilson, Mr Mike Mrdak, Transcript, 12 May 2003, p. 250.

from paying rent for Commonwealth facilities in the Indian Ocean Territories.

Sporting and Recreational Facilities

- 9.16 The shire councils in both Territories operate recreational facilities. The SOCI operates a public swimming pool which is owned by the Commonwealth, and has some sporting grounds.¹⁹ In addition, the Federal Government has allocated \$8 million for a new recreation centre. Public recreational facilities on Cocos (Keeling) Island are limited, and the islands do not have a public swimming pool.
- 9.17 Mrs Tracey Evans, Physical Education Coordinator, Cocos (Keeling) Islands District High School, noted that Cocos (Keeling) Islands lack the physical space and buildings to promote recreation and cultural events. She also stated that:

There is no netball court...As a teacher, I have taught in many small country towns...and I have sixteen years of experience ... but I have never been to a centre where these two sorts of facilities [basketball and netball courts] are not available.²⁰

Mrs Evans put forward three proposals that might alleviate the problem. The first was that an unused building in the former quarantine station could be cleaned up and used. The second called for the construction of a new facility and the third for the laying of a concrete slab.²¹ In relation to Mrs Evans' first option, AQIS has explained that the state of the buildings and the consequent insurance problems preclude their being used by third parties. If the buildings were eventually gifted to the Shire Council, this may no longer be an impediment, but any such action is some way off. Mrs Evans described her second option as follows:

My vision is a cultural hall – a shed, a building or whatever you would like to call it-big enough to house a game of some sort, with power, lighting, fans, air-conditioning and, of course, shower facilities. I believe that this sort of facility could enhance cross-cultural relationships, again with the idea of the Cocos Malays

19 Commonwealth Grants Commission, 1999, *Report on the Indian Ocean Territories*, Canprint, Canberra, p. 174.

20 Mrs Tracey Evans, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 134.

21 Mrs Tracey Evans, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 133.

staying over at night if they use the area and maybe paying a small fee if they are attending an event there.²²

Mrs Evans' third suggestion was to establish a hard-court, as follows:

My third option is laying a cement slab that could be used for basketball or netball with rotational goals, lighting and shade sails. That would be the cheapest option, I guess, if you are not going to use the quarantine station.²³

- 9.18 Mr Greg Croll, a Cocos (Keeling) Islands resident, noted that, despite being surrounded by water, there were only two places for people to swim on West Island and that they were relatively inaccessible.²⁴ He suggested that a tidal pool be constructed near the main town on West Island, where it could be used by locals and visitors.²⁵ Mr Croll pointed out that it would be logical to build the pool to coincide with the construction of the new wharf at Rumah Baru as there will be a wide range of equipment and expertise available.²⁶
- 9.19 The Committee agrees that there is a lack of public sporting and recreational facilities in the Territories. The Government is addressing the problem on Christmas Island with the construction of the recreational facility. On Cocos (Keeling) Islands, it seems that the issue could be addressed relatively cheaply, but the Committee has not formed a view on the merits of the proposals put to it. The sporting and other cultural needs of the Territory should be ascertained and met as soon as possible, possibly through a service delivery arrangement with the relevant Western Australian Government agency.

Recommendation 16

- 9.20 **That the Commonwealth arrange for a survey of the sporting and recreational needs of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands with a view to providing appropriate facilities in accessible locations.**

22 Mrs Tracey Evans, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 134.

23 Mrs Tracey Evans, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 134.

24 Mr Greg Croll, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 128.

25 Mr Greg Croll, Transcript, 13 March 2003, p. 128.

26 Mr Greg Croll, Submissions, p. 129.

Senior Citizens

- 9.21 In the past, retired people from the Territories generally relocated to Malaysia or to Australia, but more recently many have remained on the islands. As a result, there is not only a greater need for aged care, but also for suitable social outlets for older people. SOCI told the Committee that it had assisted in the formation of a senior citizens club, which was experiencing difficulty finding a suitable venue for their activities. The Shire Council stated that a request for a run-down building that the senior citizens could assist in renovating had been made to the Department of Transport and Regional Services in January 2002.²⁷
- 9.22 The Department of Transport and Regional Services informed the Committee that, as of July 2003, it is negotiating a long-term lease (10 years) with the SOCI for Location 548 Poon Saan for the establishment of the senior citizen's club. The Committee understands that, once agreed, the Shire will manage the club on behalf of the community.

27 Shire of Christmas Island, Submissions, p. 7.