



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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COMMUNITY SERVICES BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (4.54 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Community Services Bill 2007. The explanatory notes accompanying the bill advise that the objective of the bill is to help build sustainable communities by facilitating access by Queenslanders to community services. Currently, the Queensland Department of Communities provides funding to approximately 860 community organisations under the Family Services Act 1987. Funded organisations provide a wide range of services that support some of the neediest people in our communities in a range of difficult circumstances.

The intention of the bill is to provide a clearer basis on which these community organisations can enter into agreements with the Department of Communities for the delivery of these services on a contractual basis, with clear guidelines establishing contractual obligations and responsibilities. The bill is designed to provide for the contracting out of service delivery to a range of non-government organisations but establishes a funding framework that is more transparent and places more of a focus on establishing greater certainty in the way that assistance is extended to community organisations. I am pleased that the bill provides for a framework to assist and support community groups to make clear and accountable decisions when dealing with public moneys and that the bill maintains the capacity for criminal history checks of the service providers engaged by the Department of Communities. These measures should promote confidence in the activities of community organisations in the wider community.

It is important that there is confidence in these community organisations that deliver important services to our communities. Many of those services do not always have immediately tangible or observable results. The delivery of these support services to the needy in our community cannot always be fully appreciated by those individuals not receiving the services. The reality is that many of these support services are critical to those people who receive them.

I would like to talk about some of the community organisations that deliver these community support services in my electorate. The Hinchinbrook Community Support Centre and the Cardwell Shire Community Support Centre are typical of the types of community groups that are engaged by the Department of Communities to deliver support services to the community. The Hinchinbrook Community Support Centre is based in Ingham. The centre delivers support services to the Hinchinbrook shire and has a mission to empower the community through support, information, education and meeting individual needs. I can testify to the personal commitment to this mission by the staff at the Hinchinbrook Community Support Centre, all of whom I have found to be very strongly motivated by the ideal of assisting those in difficult circumstances. I have had the good fortune of working with them on a number of occasions both in relation to the needs of individuals in the local community and addressing the needs of the community at a more general level.

The Hinchinbrook Community Support Centre delivers services in the areas of community and individual support, relief for individuals and families, accommodation support and assistance to individuals and families, and youth outreach and support services. I would like to expand on the last service that I mentioned. Youth outreach and support services are particularly important for young people today, because the issues that they face are becoming more and more complex. There is no doubt that the

traditional challenges that young people face continue to be a worry. By that I mean alcohol and several soft drugs, such as cannabis. I note and draw to the attention of the House the growing body of evidence linking the use of cannabis to mental illness. We must raise awareness of this situation and highlight the very serious ramifications of what is still unfortunately considered to be a relatively harmless recreational drug.

The Hinchinbrook Community Support Centre has also taken a keen interest in the issue of housing shortages in the Hinchinbrook shire, both in terms of available rental properties and social and community housing. Recently, a rental housing options forum was held in Ingham, the primary issue raised at the meeting being the shortage of housing in Ingham. Owing to the high cost of living in larger centres, many people are moving to small rural towns. That has had a direct impact on rental properties and various public housing programs. Local real estate agents in the Hinchinbrook shire attended the forum and indicated that there are very few vacant rental properties on their books within reasonable price ranges and that each day they receive several calls seeking a property to rent. A number of construction companies are working in the area as well. They have impacted on the availability of rental properties. Employees are being housed locally, which means that there are fewer rental properties for other people who are wishing to take up residence in Ingham.

It was decided that a growth strategy was required by the Department of Housing to address the shortage of public housing in the Ingham district. I have written to the minister for housing about that matter, but it relates to the Department of Communities because many families caught in difficult accommodation circumstances often turn to the Hinchinbrook Community Support Centre for assistance.

Another issue that I would like to raise with the minister is in relation to the issue of community support services and the future of the limited hours child-care services delivered by the Cardwell Shire Community Support Centre in Tully. I wrote to the minister about this issue and the minister was kind enough to visit the Cardwell Shire Community Support Centre on 5 April this year. Between my representations and his visit, he will be familiar with the circumstances of the support centre. The minister's visit was greatly appreciated.

The minister will recall that the management committee of the community centre indicated at the time that it would be likely that the limited hours child-care service would not be maintained and, in fact, they have made a decision that the service will close in December of this year. The issue relates to the financial viability of the service and the inappropriateness of child-care services being delivered in the same facility as the other community support services that are offered through the support centre. The difficulty arises due to the fact that the demand for child-care services is acute.

No doubt the minister will recall the size of the facility that is currently located at 54 Bryant Street. The facility is far too small to continue to offer all the above services, particularly the child-care services, as the demand for services in child care continues to increase. Certainly the minister would have been able to appreciate that when he was on site in April. Indeed, the number of community support workers in the area of the building dedicated to the delivery of community support services may actually be in breach of workplace health and safety standards.

As discussed with the minister at the meeting in April, there is a view that the old Tully preschool site offers an excellent opportunity for space to be acquired to house community based services such as those currently offered through the Cardwell Shire Community Support Centre now that the site is surplus to the needs of Education Queensland following the introduction of the prep year. At the time the unknown factor was the process that would be undertaken to dispose of the old Tully preschool site and when this would be completed. The site was originally provided to the Queensland Department of Education by the Cardwell Shire Council for the establishment of the preschool.

The Cardwell Shire Council lodged an expression of interest in the old Tully preschool site. It was concerned that the site would be lost as a community asset. The Cardwell Shire Council had already committed significant funding to the construction of an outside school hours care facility on Education Queensland land at Tully State School and had certainly provided significant support to the existing community support centre over many years. Given that at the time there was considerable uncertainty in relation to the local council amalgamations, Cardwell Shire Council was reluctant to commit to the acquisition of another significant asset in the area.

On Wednesday, 30 May 2007 a meeting was held between the management committee and staff of the Cardwell Shire Community Support Centre and parents using the child-care services, known as the Parents of Tully Limited Hours Action Group. Representatives from the Cardwell Shire Council and the Department of Communities were in attendance. I was asked to chair the meeting.

The parents expressed their concern about the closure of the limited hours day care services. The management committee of the support centre outlined their reasons for the decision not to offer child-care services beyond December 2007. The meeting then discussed possible courses of action to ensure that there is not a significant child-care shortage in Tully. Ultimately, the management committee of the support centre, the parents action group and I were focused on the end result, being the ongoing delivery of

community support services and child-care services to the Tully district and its community. In the end, the Cardwell Shire Council was declared a preferred tender and the old Tully preschool site was offered to it, but at the market price for the land, despite the Cardwell Shire Council's ongoing significant support for the community support centre and the council providing the land to Education Queensland in the first instance.

It is unfortunate that the Cardwell Shire Council has had to expend those funds. I thought it would have been more appropriate for the Department of Communities to assist with the ongoing delivery of both community support services and child-care places to the Cardwell Shire community by organising for the land and the facility to be returned to the council without incurring a large cost as the services provided to the local community in the Tully area by the community support centre are vital.

I thank the staff and volunteers who work at both the Cardwell Shire Community Support Centre and the Hinchinbrook Community Support Centre for their important work in the community. In many circumstances their efforts provide families with support and assistance at times when there appears to be little hope. Placing those few remarks on the record, I am pleased to support the bill.