

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria

Mooroopna— 16 March 2010

#### Members

Mr B. Finn

Ms M. Kairouz

Mr W. Noonan

Mr J. Perera

Mrs E. J. Powell

Mr J. Scheffer

Mrs H. Shardey

Chair: Mr J. Perera

Deputy Chair: Mrs E. J. Powell

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

Research Officers: Dr T. Caulfield, Ms T. Roy

#### Witnesses

Mr M. Buckworth, infrastructure manager, and

Mr D. Atkinson, housing services manager, Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative Ltd.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, and thank you for your time to appear before the committee in its inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing. This is not a government inquiry; it is a bipartisan Parliament inquiry. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided in the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. We are recording the proceedings. You will be sent a copy of the transcript. You will be able to make minor adjustments to it if necessary at that stage.

Please introduce yourself before you make your verbal submission. After that it will be followed by questions from the panel.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to speak to the committee. My name is Michael Buckworth. I work for Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative in Shepparton. I have worked for that organisation for about 20-odd years. I basically came up through housing; I had numerous different roles there. I am on the joint planning committee for the state of Victoria. That was formed before the handover to where we are heading now, which I will touch on shortly. Dwayne Atkinson is the current housing officer for Rumbalara as we speak.

As I said, this is probably new for us, given that we have just come from being funded from the federal government to the state government. There is a three-year transitional period in that handover. So pretty much right now we sit in no man's land, so to speak. What I mean by that is that basically we had three years to either become a registered housing association and/or provider or form a relationship with an organisation that is. We are sort of going through that process and all the pros and cons and that sort of thing. That raises a number of points for us just due to the uncertainty of where we are heading and what is going to happen.

I have put some points together. This was a PowerPoint presentation. It is basically just about our housing services and our priorities, and the main headlines. I will start with the first one, which was the handover from federal to state, which is funding. On each page I have just got a bit of a paragraph and a couple of questions after that to put to the panel. I am not expecting answers here, because some of these things you will not know yourself. They will be for further discussion by government parties and bodies. That is fine. But they are basically our concerns I guess.

As I said, prior to the handover there was a joint planning committee for the state of Victoria. It was made up of a number of different representatives: the Office of Housing, which is state government; FaHCSIA; the Aboriginal Housing Board at the time before it became Aboriginal Housing Victoria; the community housing groups, which is people like Rumbalara; and the indigenous community organisations. That committee was formed after the federal government chose its direction to push indigenous housing or community housing to the state in Victoria. We had participation and input in the development, and there were talks around housing standards for construction and those types of things. That group got disbanded.

At the last meeting we attended there was a recommendation made by the committee that an indigenous steering committee be formed with all the Aboriginal organisations that provide community housing. To my knowledge that has not happened. I am wondering if it is going to, because certainly those communities need a voice to work with people like yourselves and committees to help develop indigenous housing to provide for those communities.

That is one question: what happened to that recommendation by that committee? Is that going to be followed up? Will that happen?

You will see on the bottom there we ask what indigenous representation is present or represented by this committee here today.

**Mrs POWELL** — I am the shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, with a strong interest in Aboriginal issues. It is part of our terms of reference that we want to make sure that we deal with Aboriginal housing issues. It is a strong interest from this committee.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — That would be good if we could follow up that first point about the committee. It was certainly a recommendation from the joint planning committee for the state of Victoria before the change.

I will move on to the next one, which is our options within that change — becoming a registered housing organisation, housing provider and those sorts of things. Certainly the organisation — and the abbreviation for Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative Ltd is RAC Ltd — wishes to become a registered housing association. To get an understanding of what that means for us we have got to go through constitutional change. We work through a community-controlled organisation. Things of that magnitude are not so simple. You talk about community meetings and public meetings: all of that has to be voted on and those amendments have to be made to the constitution. Then certainly we have to go through the accreditation standards and all that. I might add that we have had offers of assistance from the Office of Housing and the Aboriginal Housing Board. We have a lot of good friends in those departments, and they are very supportive of where we have come from and where we want to go.

We may run out of time to make that happen by the end of the three-year transition. If that happens, are we able to get an extension on us achieving that? I would hate to think that we would get to a point of being told, ‘You’ve had enough time, so we’ll tell you what to do with your houses now’. We would not like to see that happen at all.

That is another question: is it going to be possible to extend that time if we are not quite in position at the end of the three-year period?

**The CHAIR** — As a parliamentary inquiry we will not be able to give you any answers, but your questions will be recorded by Hansard and will be collated when the report is prepared.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, I fully expect that. I do not expect answers here today. It is just an opportunity to raise the questions.

**The CHAIR** — That is good.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — That leads on to things like policy, repairs and maintenance for purchasing, construction — those types of things. Before the handover happened a couple of years ago — I cannot give you the exact date; I should have had that — there was a property audit conducted. As a result there was basically \$1 million given to our organisation for repairs and maintenance. Unfortunately that was not enough to tackle all the works on that scope. It left approximately a \$300 000 shortfall to actually achieve all the works from the audit. But also from the time the audit was conducted to the time the money actually started to flow was another year or so. So you still had houses that had depreciated in that time. What I am saying to you is that right now, as we sit here today, a further \$300 000 needs to go into finishing off those repairs. I think that was part of the condition of the arrangements between the federal government and the state government with the handover to the state.

The state wanted the houses in I guess what they would call fair and reasonable condition — and fair enough; I think it is okay — but it does create other issues for us. You have got tenants living in houses that need repair. If we physically do not have the money, we have got to deal with a lot of complaints, and Dwayne faces that on the ground pretty much every day. Just behind that, will Rumbalara receive that money before the handover commences? Is that something that the state government will look at? I am probably at a little bit of a loss. Is it still the federal government’s responsibility? I do not know. All I know is that the work needs to be done.

Has any work begun on policy for Aboriginal housing, and if so, by whom, because we have not been involved in that — which goes back to the forming of a steering group — or is it assumed that Rumbalara will fall into the current state housing policy and have to basically come under social housing, which is the same as the Office of Housing? The Aboriginal Housing Board — I am not trying to discredit them by any means — cut their teeth on social housing. That was their background. They have only just made the change to community housing. We have delivered community housing since day dot.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — Can I interrupt there, Chair? How do you define the difference between social and community housing?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — This is why I booked the last appointment, because there are a lot of things to go through.

To paint a bit of a picture for you, Rumbalara is probably a unique organisation. When you get a chance to have a look at the AGM book you will work that out. What it means for us is that it is a pretty close-knit community. You have got people in housing, and we are either related to them or we know them, so our phones do not turn off. We cannot go to the local footy match down the street without having to deal with those issues and those people wanting to know where they are on the waiting list or asking, 'How come my maintenance has not been done?' or 'How come Bill got the house before I did?' — all those types of situations.

We have got not just housing; there is health, so we have got doctors and nurses, and there is dental, so we have got dental care. We have got basically the Woongi unit, which is social and emotional wellbeing. All the things that come out of DHS we have got; it is a one-stop shop for the indigenous community, so we have support around those issues. We refer. It is not just maintaining a waiting list and representing the Minister for Housing over a counter. You are physically out there every day going around. You will see rent arrears and ask, 'What's the problem? I'll go around and see Auntie Mary and see what's happening', so it becomes very personalised. You walk in and ask, 'How are you going?', and they say, 'Sit down'. You ask, 'What's going on?', and they say, 'Look, there was a funeral this week, and I had a mob over from Robinvale and they've eaten me out of house and home. They've been here for a week. So we've had to pay the bills and do those sorts of things, so I couldn't pay the rent this week'.

We deal with those issues hands on. We have a much better understanding of them, and have more sympathy and empathy towards all those sorts of things. That is the difference with community housing: it is trying to deliver the same service out of an office in DHS.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — Were you ever a housing organisation funded through ATSIC?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — So that was many years ago?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes. I have been around about 20-odd years. Personally or the organisation?

**Mrs SHARDEY** — When did the change for you take place?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — We are halfway through it; we have got about 18 months now. It is probably very remiss of me not explaining how this come about, if I can backtrack.

There was a document written by the previous government — *Living in the Sunburnt Country*. It was very damning of Aboriginal housing organisations. Basically point blank it said that they could not manage their own affairs — it was simply squandering, it was a bottomless pit, millions of dollars went in that they could not account for and all this sort of thing. The federal government turned around and said, 'Okay, let's have a real look at this. We only want to service remote areas, and we don't consider Victoria to be remote enough', because demographically we are close to schools, education and shops, unlike some of those people living out in the Northern Territory and places like that. So the federal government said, 'We want to push them onto the state, and that's what we're going to do'. That is all well and good. The only differences are the demographics, which you see when you start to sit down and look at the health issues — diabetes, the mortality rate with SIDS and all these types of things. There is not much difference between that and out in the Northern Territory. If you drive around Shepparton today — you said you went for a drive — how many Aboriginal people did you see walking around the streets? You would not have seen any, if not many.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — Can we ask a bit more about the structure, though? Is Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative covering housing and health? Are they all now wrapped into one?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — No. It is basically all under the umbrella of the organisation. We are multifunded, whether it be state or federal. There is OATSIH, DHS, FaHCSIA still, and state now with housing. Yes, all the different funding bodies you could probably imagine come to our organisation. Justice and night patrol, that is all DHS and the Office of Housing. We are the largest indigenous community outside of metropolitan Melbourne.

**Mr NOONAN** — Would you like to get through your presentation?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, I will get through that.

**Mr NOONAN** — I am sure we will have many questions for you at the end as well.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — With staff recruitment and retention, again the housing office's position has always been recurrent. Is that going to continue? Are we going to be able to afford that, or are they going to make us take salaries and wages to support this from rental income when there is hardly enough to keep the program afloat as it is?

There are four main positions that work in housing, and SAAP is a part of that. I do not know if you know much about the SAAP positions and what they do. I am assuming you do. We have a SAAP position, but it is a toothless tiger. It is basically a position that sits there and does referral work to the Rural Housing Network, which is basically the state again. They have all the HEF dollars, which helps with assistance and all that sort of stuff. We do not allocate HEF; we do not have the money. There are Aboriginal dollars sitting in mainstream organisations where you have got an indigenous organisation that is quite capable of administering and running those sorts of programs, yet we have only got a referral agency. It does not make sense when look at, say, rural housing and the transitional housing. For the last couple of years we made up nearly 100 per cent of their transitional waiting list. The bulk of their clients were indigenous. I think Dwayne has got a few stats on those things around SAAP, which we will hand out after.

**Mr ATKINSON** — They will be in our folder.

**Mr NOONAN** — I think we have got them already. Thanks.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — You have got a worker there who just does referral work. We would like to have our own HEF dollars to be able to help our own clients instead of having to send them to mainstream organisations or white organisations where there is not that comfortable feel for them for a start. It gets back to indigenous people being the best ones to deal with indigenous issues, if you like — not that that particular issue is related strictly to Aboriginal people.

In there as well we have also got a financial counsellor. I will explain a bit more about that when we get into the home purchase section. A financial counsellor is crucial — I do not care that it is an Aboriginal organisation — to any social housing or community organisation. They are just critical. You need to teach people financial literacy. You are talking about people who have been dragged from pillar to post and who will never own their own homes and all those types of things. They do not even know how to sit down and prepare a decent meal for their kids. When it comes to paying rent and all these types of things, that is how we can battle that. It is teaching all that through a financial counsellor. I will get into that a bit more after, but that is a very critical position.

Then you have got another housing officer who sits beside Dwayne. It is a very tight unit. I can honestly say that as a result of all those people working together our rent arrears for the past 15 years have been pretty much non-existent. As I said here today — where are we, Dwayne?

**Mr ATKINSON** — About \$4000.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — We are about \$4000 over, and only 58 properties. I challenge anyone in social housing to come up with figures that are better than that. You would not. At times over those properties it has been down to \$1000.

Getting back to the reporting that was done in that document *Living in the Sunburnt Country*, there are certainly no congratulations and no 'Well done' to communities like Rumbalara that actually have achieved and have kicked some goals. But it all seems to have fallen on deaf ears, and you are just tarred with the one brush. That is probably all I have got to say about that. I will move on to the next one.

The home purchase incentive scheme was something we developed a few years ago. I have met with Minister Wynne on two occasions, and the second time I asked him about the future, because we are a very big believer in owning your own home. That is not for everybody. You are not going to expect that everybody does that.

You are going to have people who go through the social housing services and all that type of thing. We identified very early the problems why people get into rent arrears and then they cannot maintain loan repayments, rent repayments and all those sorts of things. As I said before, it is financial literacy.

Basically somebody signs up to go into one of our houses and you say to them, 'In the long term, would like to own your own home?', and of course everybody says, 'Yes, that would be great', because again you are talking about people at the bottom end of the chain whose mum and dad have never owned their own house. They have been kicked from pillar to post, like I said. The effects of that are, down at that end, drugs, alcohol and all those types of things. There is property abuse; people punch holes in walls, and fights and things happen.

On the other end of the scale, if you teach somebody and guide them along — teach them what equity is in a home and all that sort of thing — then they start to get an understanding and you can set them to a plan. In 5 years it might be an achievable thing, and if not 5, it might be 10, but the whole time you have got the financial counsellor working with them, paying off whatever baggage they have got, whether it is a credit card they did not pay off or the \$3000 loan they used to buy a car down the street that has now blown up and they cannot drive it; it is dealing with all those issues. That is what this person does.

You go through that, and you do not set them up to fail. You are not going to give them an unrealistic task. Yes, people do fall off the wagon, but I can sit here and say to you that since I have been involved, not just through this program but outside, personally I have helped 12 families, maybe more. You are talking about a range of people where some of them have been long-term drug abusers, some have never worked a day in their lives. These people all own their own homes now, some through this system and some through personal assistance. Not one of them has lost their home. They actually go out and it gives them motivation to go and find some work, and then once they start to do that, that is theirs and they do not want to lose it. All of a sudden they become proud, so their self-esteem picks up. The social determinant of health, particularly in that community, in owning your own home is something quite huge.

As part of that process I had a point system in place where you might say, 'Okay, we've bought this house. We paid \$100 000 for it. For as long as you're renting that house, the longer you've been in there the bigger the discount, so 10 years might be 5 per cent off the purchase price'. And the age of the house might be another one. It ranged from 5 per cent to a maximum of 20 per cent discount off the purchase of the house. When you weigh this up, if we said it was \$100 000, we would sell it to them for \$80 000. At \$80 000 they would also be eligible for the first home buyers grant and all that sort of thing, so that would be less they would have to borrow.

They have had the full backing by us to get them there in the first place. It is not a 'give me'. You might think it is, but I have put a caveat on that property for the first four or five years so that they cannot cash it in, reap the benefits and walk away. If they try to do that, we get our money back.

There are a few things put into place, but this is a program we developed and put to the federal government. They funded it, supported it for three years, and in that three years — what have we had? About six?

**Mr ATKINSON** — About six.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Now that has all fallen by the wayside. I have battled to keep the financial counsellor on board. We have begged, borrowed and stolen, and I have finally got FaHCSIA to come back to the party and fund her for the next 18 months, but at the end of 18 months I am still looking for funding to try to keep her there. I have certainly seen the rewards in doing that.

After going through that, even though I have been a little bit all over the shop, we would love that program to continue. I am quite sure that if you spoke to the federal government and FaHCSIA and asked about that program they would tell you it was the only shared-responsibility agreement in the nation at the time around housing.

When I put the same thing to Minister Wynne, his initial response, straight off the bat, to me was, 'Why would you sell a house at a reduction? That is just bad business'. I just sat there and looked at him and thought, 'Okay, you really have not been briefed on all this sort of stuff', because it is the social determinants and health you are talking about — people's long-term health. It is self-esteem, it is creating employment, it is less visits to the doctor. It is all those sorts of things. It impacts on the other end of the social spectrum. He then informed me

that he was basically not interested in that sort of thing and that he was, apparently, the biggest landlord in the state. It seemed to me like he was looking more towards building assets and capitalism. That is not what community housing, as far as I am concerned, is all about.

I will move to the next one unless you have got some questions on that. The SAAP position; I might let Dwayne talk about SAAP. I have been chewing your ears off.

**Mr ATKINSON** — I think you all know what the SAAP program stands for. There are some statistics at the back of that document that I handed to you before, around numbers and what Carol has done over the years. Michael touched on the HEF dollars. Rumbalara gets no control or say over the HEF dollars that are controlled by Rural Housing Network. Last year I think it was about \$70 000 that Rural Housing had allocated to them. Out of that \$70 000 I think we had something like 22 per cent of our community that actually used that service.

Although it is great to use that service when it is possible, there are still a lot of our people that do not get a chance to tap into those funds. You would be surprised at the amount of people that get turned away from Rural Housing and get referred back to Rumbalara. As Michael was saying, it is all about the health and wellbeing of clients. If you have got nowhere to stay and you have got no dollars to afford to stay in motels, caravans or things like that, it impacts on your health and wellbeing.

One of the questions that we thought about was: is Rumbalara going to receive housing in its own right? That refers back to what Michael was talking about before.

I was interested to hear the last gentleman speaking about people who are living in the bush being part of that. In the SAAP program we have had about 20 people over the last financial year who came through, looking for support. They were indigenous people and they were looking for support for accommodation because they were living under the bridge or in tents along the river. That is probably one of the things that we would like to do, to have control over our own HEF dollars. It would make a lot of difference.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — It just gets back to programs that we can certainly run and manage ourselves. We have proved that. Our governance is second to none when it comes to indigenous communities in the nation, let alone the state. Our finance and accountability, as I said, is probably at the pinnacle of any indigenous organisation that you might want to name. In the early days, okay, we were not so good at those things. We have got better and now we probably excel, so it may be time that a few of these indigenous programs that have been running in mainstream services started to come back home to where they should be. It is things like, as Dwayne said, HEF dollars that we can manage ourselves.

Certainly for the transitional or short-term housing I have been screaming for years just to get nomination rights. Basically those houses are still held by Rural Housing, and supposedly we get the nomination rights on two of their properties, but it just does not seem to happen that often. Certainly for the number of clients we service and who need that, I talk to them about housing stock and use that for that purpose. Realistically that is not something you should do or you want to do, but how do you fill the void? Our houses are supposed to be for long-term housing, not short-term.

**Mrs POWELL** — Michael or Dwayne, one of the people who gave evidence talked about insufficient regard given to the cultural needs of Aboriginal families in the design and allocation of public housing properties. When we asked what that meant, what cultural significance had to be put into it, they were not really 100 per cent sure. Can you tell us what the special needs of an Aboriginal person are; what they would be looking for in public housing?

**Mr SCHEFFER** — Can I just correct that. It was not that they were not sure; they did not feel it was their place to speak for you.

**Mrs POWELL** — Okay.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — I think that is fair. It was not that they did not have a view on it; it was just that they thought it was not their place.

**Mrs POWELL** — I think they knew we were speaking to you as well, so they probably thought it was better that you answer it, because you would know the specific needs.

**Mr NOONAN** — I think the term was they were ‘underqualified’.

**Mrs POWELL** — Yes, they were not qualified.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — I guess if we have money to either build or construct a home or spot purchase, or whatever it is, firstly, the rule of thumb — and everyone would do this — is that you would look closely to schools, supermarkets and access because of transport and all those types of things. Secondly, you would look at the space in the house. We have a lot of extended families who visit our people in their homes. When you drive down a street you can normally pick the Aboriginal house because there are usually half a dozen cars, because family are there and that sort of thing. Nine times out of 10 as well they will be hosting another family member who has been evicted or whatever it is. They have got homeless people in play as well. So there is the room aspect.

When it comes to birthdays and all those types of things, some families like bigger space. Privacy is another really big thing. They are very private sort of people. They do not like neighbours gawking over the fence; all that sort of thing. It is horses for courses. We have had some families that are just not suited to being in town at all. In our capacity we could spot purchase out on the Murray River. We have a property at Bearii that is on 4 acres, because we were not restricted to just spot purchase or construct within the central business district.

**Mr ATKINSON** — I suppose one of the other things when you are talking about community housing is the fact that — and I think Michael touched on it before — you are talking about people who come from low-income families that have not had an opportunity to purchase their own homes, and they do not sit at a high social level in the community. You get a lot of children who are brought up the same way, and they do not get a chance to go into private rental because they do not have the — what do you call them?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — They have not got the skills or — —

**Mr ATKINSON** — Referral letters and things like that. You do not have the support letters to back you up to say you are a good paying tenant and things like that, so they are more or less forced to stay in that extended family situation. It is nothing for some houses to be holding 10 or 15 to 20 people at a time. That happens in other cultures too; I acknowledge that.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — It is not because they necessarily want to live like that; it is just that there is not usually a lot of choice. You do not turn your back on family. You are there to help, and you do all those sorts of things. As far as the design of a house, it is usually roomy and that sort of thing to cater for those younger families. Once you come out of the younger families with kids, that sort of scenario, that is the other thing: when you get to around 40 or 45 you are almost classed as an elder. Under HACC terminology for Aboriginal people you are; I think it is legislated for Aboriginal aged care. At that rate you are an elder at 45. Once they move into that territory they still love to be with the grandkids and all that sort of stuff, but like anyone, they usually want to have a visit. It is fine if they come around but in small doses. They like their privacy and that sort of thing. They are not much different to any older person, I guess. But at the same time, if push comes to shove and a situation happened tomorrow and they have to go and look after those grandkids, they will. Yes, they will take on three or four kids or whatever it is. It is more about a sense of being. It has got really nothing to do with the building materials in the house or how that house is designed; it is a state of mind.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. Under the home purchase incentive scheme you mentioned that houses should be offered to Aboriginal people with a 5 to 10 per cent discount on the purchase price. Is that right?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — It was a scale.

**The CHAIR** — You said ‘purchase price’. By that time the market price would be way up, so it is not really 5 to 10 per cent; it will be about 20 to 30 per cent. On the other hand, if the price has gone down during a recession or some unusual period of time, you would then be offering it above the market rate?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Sorry, there is a misunderstanding there. It is actually on the current market value of the day. You get the house valued at the time, and that is what the price is. If I paid \$100 000 for it and in five years it has increased in value to \$150 000, \$150 000 is what the price is, and then you take your deductions off that.

**The CHAIR** — Yes, so market value.

**Mr ATKINSON** — But it might have decreased at the same time.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — It could have decreased, yes.

**The CHAIR** — Can you also explain the My Moola program?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, we were trying to find ways initially to continue the financial counsellor. My Moola is something that was put together in partnership with the ANZ Bank and the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club. Was the state in that at the time?

**Mr ATKINSON** — I could not tell you.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — There was a fee for service, and it was teaching financial literacy. It was getting in groups of young people from around the footy club and different places and doing 15-week courses and less, teaching kids about saving money. You set goals and challenges. One young bloke wanted a bike because he had never owned one. You set him on a savings program and teach him how to do that, and at the end of it he would go and buy himself a bike, something he probably would never have achieved if he had not done that and worked with people of his own gender, age and background.

That dealt with children right through to adults, talking about home ownership. Even people who have achieved home ownership start to look at other things and talk about investment, just like I am sure anyone sitting at the table would have experienced — owning your own home, looking at equity and seeing what you can do with it, trying to provide for your retirement and all those sorts of things. It is teaching all that.

**Mr NOONAN** — Can I just be clear; how many properties does Rumbalara own?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Where are we now? Fifty-six.

**Mr NOONAN** — How have they — —

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Sorry, there is a bit more to this. Not all the properties were owned and funded by the federal government. If the state government looks at what is actually owned — and at the time it was about 58 — they are not all properties that have been funded by the federal government. There are not caveats on all those properties. At least 12 of those properties are owned outright by our organisation.

**Mr NOONAN** — How have you funded the extra 12?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — It is tough.

**Mr NOONAN** — You have had to fundraise?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Over time; the majority of those properties were actually purchased well before I came into the office. In the earlier part they had a building team there; they ran a building company. It did a few ventures back in the day.

**Mr NOONAN** — Just to be clear. you had the title on 58 properties?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — I think we are at 56 now. We have sold a couple of them.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — It says 52 here in your annual report.

**Mr NOONAN** — So 56 now; did you want to clarify that?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Hang on, I will clarify that.

**Mr NOONAN** — Sure.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — I have not actually been working in housing for the past 12 months; I have been in community infrastructure.

**Mr NOONAN** — It is not critical; it is just for my benefit. I am just wondering if you have the title on the 56 properties.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, they are always bought in the organisation's name, and usually when they are funded federally a caveat goes on those.

**Mr NOONAN** — What is that caveat? That you can only dispose of them at a particular time?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, basically you cannot do anything with them. If you want to do something like that, you have to request permission and explain yourself as to why. That process generally takes quite some time. You have to get approval.

**Mr NOONAN** — Just in relation to the offer by the Office of Housing to assist your organisation to potentially fulfil the vision of Rumbalara becoming a housing association, have you taken up that offer as yet?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — We are working towards it.

**Mr NOONAN** — Has there been any formal exchange?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — No, not as yet. Again, it is not an easy thing. You have to send out letters to a community, organise a public meeting, come in and run all that past them, and try to get changes made to the constitution. It is a pretty big deal.

**Mr NOONAN** — But if you have not had any formal exchange with the Office of Housing, how do you know what you have actually got to do — —

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Sorry; we have had meetings with them. People from the office have come down probably twice since the handover. Contrary to some of the things I have been talking about here today, we have a fantastic relationship with the Rural Housing Network. Even if we had to partner with someone until that happened, we could with them.

**Mr NOONAN** — A final question: we have already heard from Aboriginal Housing Victoria, which was before our committee in Melbourne. By memory I think it has about 1100 properties as a housing association and a commitment to add another 200 to that stock. How do you work with Aboriginal Housing Victoria, and are some of the people who are placed in housing in this region placed through Aboriginal Housing Victoria as the association?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — To answer the first question about how we work with them, I guess we have always viewed Aboriginal Housing Victoria and the Office of Housing as the same thing, and so a lot of referrals off our waiting list that we cannot look after go through to them. I tried earlier on to do things with the Office of Housing, and they basically both were the same until they just recently made the change to Aboriginal housing, so it is little bit hard to comment on. I know when we were trying to do things, if we had people who did the wrong thing and left owing money or there was damage or whatever, we would have something in place to say that they could not come and be housed again until they paid back that debt. Surprisingly, some people do, because five years down the track they have burnt their bridges everywhere else and they need to be housed again. Those sorts of things happen.

What I am trying to say is that I have had people move into our housing who are at the same time eligible to be on the Office of Housing's or the Aboriginal Housing Board's waiting list. As far as we are concerned, if somebody comes to us and they are already housed, then they are not in desperate need of housing; they already have a roof over their head. There may be other issues to deal with that, but I am certainly not going to pull them out of a house to stick them into another one. It does not make sense.

Our turnover of housing is not that great. We might be lucky to house one or two people a year, and certainly since we have received no funding for new purchases, it has only been if somebody has been evicted or left that we have been able to shift anybody off our waiting list. We had to put all these rules and policies in place to cull the waiting list, if you like, because we are giving people false hope. They would be sitting on our waiting list for nearly 20 years before we would even look like housing them. You had 100-odd people. We had to put all those sorts of things in place.

I guess what I am leading to is that we never had the assistance from the office in regard to our people going to them with all those moneys owing; they would still house them. They would not make them accountable to try to pay any of that money back. To us it looks like that is not teaching anybody anything, because it just says it is okay to create rent arrears and move on and not worry about it.

If somebody came to us and asked us to do a rent cheque, we would get permission from them and ring the office, and if they had money owing to the office, we would not house them. We would say, 'We can't house you until you have paid back that debt'.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — The Office of Housing would not either. If you owe money to the Office of Housing, unless you agree to a scheme to pay that money, you do not get rehoused.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, they just never considered any of that; they would house the people regardless. I had no assistance coming back the other way trying to recoup our money. What I am saying is that the system is flawed. They do not teach anybody anything in regard to rent arrears, respect for property and those types of things.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — I guess I am still trying to understand how this handover is going to take place so that you are no longer going to be federally funded as a housing organisation. In terms of the department, has the Office of Housing discussed with you and can you explain to us how you are going to fit into the state system? What are you going to be? Are you still going to be a housing organisation? Who is going to own the 56 homes that are currently under your management? If Aboriginal people in your community are without housing, where do they apply? What sort of waiting list is it?

I do not understand how you are going to fit into a state system and retain any of your independence, because becoming a housing association comes with the responsibilities of being able to raise capital, and that is a whole different ball game. I am just trying to understand where you see yourselves.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Right now you are exactly where we are. We do not know how all this is going to come together; nobody can tell us. We have no idea. We are just sort of plodding along in no-man's-land at the minute; we are still providing a housing service. Like I said, we do not know what sort of policy we are going to have to operate on. All we know is that if we are not a registered housing association and/or provider or if we do not form a partnership with someone who is, we are not going get any funding.

**Mrs POWELL** — You said at the end of three years. How close are you to the end of three years?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — About 18 months, roughly.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — You are halfway through it.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, we are halfway through. I cannot answer your questions. I do not know.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — But in terms of the actual homes that are there and their handover to the state, will those homes become Office of Housing homes?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Well, this is the question. Legally, can they do that? The federal government bought the houses. You cannot just hand over a caveat without some sort of exchange; that is illegal. I think that is why it actually took a bit longer than they thought, because the legal eagles had to nut it out to make that happen. You cannot just transfer — —

**Mrs SHARDEY** — So you do not know what the status of your organisation or those homes really is?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — They are ours. I guess they will always be ours. The question is just the caveats. Have they worked out a system where they can hand them over federally to the state? I do not know. That is what they were working on. Anything that is bought today would come under the Office of Housing and would be state-owned. It would be in our name but with a state caveat with the Office of Housing, the same as their properties, if I bought one tomorrow. All the existing properties, they cannot tell us about because they are still trying to sort it out. It was like, 'This is what we wanted to do with you — put you into the state — but give us a bit more time to work out the finer details'. They still have not worked it out. That is why they gave us a

three-year transition period. They are still sorting it out. The questions you are asking are exactly the questions I am asking. We do not know.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — We are out of time, so mine is a short question, but I am sure it has got — —

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — It has probably got a long answer!

**Mr SCHEFFER** — I do not know. First of all, thanks very much for your presentation. You touched on the matter of Aboriginal people in the private rental market and the difficulties with that in terms of getting references and all the stuff you talked about before. Does Rumbalara have a relationship with the real estate agencies in the area? How does that work? These are two different questions. In relation to housing associations you said you had a good relationship with the Rural Housing Network. Do you talk to them about these transitions?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes. All I will say about the first question is that in Shepparton racism is alive and well. You do not get a lot of assistance from real estate agencies. On many occasions over the years I have had people come in or ring for assistance trying to get into a private rental property. They have either rung up or walked into the agency. If they ring up on the phone they will say, 'I want to have a look at a house round here in such-and-such street', and the agent will say, 'Okay, call in and pick up the keys'. They walk in the door, and that house has mysteriously disappeared or they are told, 'Sorry, that has just gone' or all these sorts of things.

So they will come in and talk to people like us. I will throw them in the car and I will drive them down there. I will walk straight into the real estate agency and say, 'This is Dwayne. He is obviously Aboriginal. Is that going to be an issue? We want to come around and have a look at this property'. That sort of approach gets them on the back foot, and then you might get the keys to get a look in. Sometimes you get the house, sometimes you do not.

Many a time I have bought properties. I bought one in Kyabram a couple of years back off an old couple who were retiring. They were stoked and got a bottle of wine out and all the rest of it; they were rapt. I remember that the next morning the lady was absolutely distraught and in tears because she had told the neighbours next door. All the neighbours threatened and abused them because they did not want Aboriginal people living in that house in that street. She rang up and actually said, 'Look, I can't sell it to you'. They are the sorts of things you deal with.

In the last couple of years a prominent local builder in Shepparton built a couple of spec units just near one of the local primary schools. I went down there. Yes, they were nice units, \$265 000. I said, 'I'd like to buy one of those units. I have a single mum'. The builder said, 'Who for?'. I said, 'Rumbalara'. He said, 'Oh, no, look these are upmarket units, mate. We don't really want to attract that sort of clientele into these'. What do you do with that? You deal with this stuff every day.

We are in the middle of a couple of big projects right now. Sorry, I am getting off housing. We are building an aged-care facility up the road. That has drawn so much attention unnecessarily and wrongfully, with the amount of banter that has been flying around with misconceptions about drug and alcohol centres and all these types of things and behavioural problems that may exist. We are talking about an aged-care facility, for God's sake! It is like Tarcoola; these are people who are old and retired. To manage and run aged-care facilities you have to be accredited; there are certain rules and regulations and systems you have to adhere to. But that is just how it is with the wider community, and housing is no different.

**Mrs POWELL** — Was there a youth component of that, Mike, because they were some of the issues that people got into their minds — that there was something to do with disadvantaged youth being housed there as well?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Disadvantaged, yes. But to explain that a little bit more, without taking up too much more time, you are talking about accommodation for kids who will come from all over the nation who are identified as likely to achieve but do not have access to good education and that sort of thing. They will come to Shepparton. They will attend all different schools — it could be Notre Dame, the Catholic school, or the high school or wherever it is — and will come and stay. Not that we have the funding to build this yet, but the accommodation for these guys will be like a unit with, say, four or seven bedrooms, but they will also come

with a representative from their community who is responsible for them. So they will always be under parental control and they will always have someone to look after them.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — But is that part of this project for an aged-care facility?

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — Yes, it is on the site. It is a 20-acre site. But one thing we did take off there was a men's support program, and that is actually for family violence fellas. Okay, so we had a good think about that and we withdrew that. You are talking about men who are perpetrators of family violence. Maybe it is not the best thing to put there. We are aware of the comments and all those sorts of things. A lot of the stuff is just the unknown: people either do not know Aboriginal people or they only read things in the paper and they are not associated with a community, so there are misconceptions. We will see how we go.

**The CHAIR** — We are running over time. We might have to wind up there. Thank you very much for being present here today.

**Mr BUCKWORTH** — You are welcome.

**Committee adjourned.**