GROH needs to be better for all

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The announcement by the Cook Labor government of an extra $419 million over four years for the biggest ever build of Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH) is a massive win for the SSTUWA, its members and fellow public sector unions.

Many times over the years the SSTUWA has used *Western Teacher* to highlight the extensive range of issues members experience with GROH. We have had multiple articles over the years about the decline in the standard of GROH, not just in terms of infrastructure but equally as concerning in the staffing of the organisation and the way customers (for that's exactly what GROH users are) are treated.

This coordinated campaign has delivered results because of the willingness of members to share their experiences. Research-backed submissions by the SSTUWA and other public sector unions have driven the state government to tackle some of the issues. The SSTUWA's pleas for more funding ahead of the state election saw $104 million promised for an extra 100 GROH homes, with an extra 78 properties added to the scheme since June and construction contracts signed in the South-West, Goldfields, Mid-West, Gascoyne and Wheatbelt. Now this additional funding has been announced.

Make no mistake, this is a huge win for all of the SSTUWA members who have shared their stories and helped us campaign for changes to GROH. The Cook government deserves full credit for listening and acting. We also need to recognise that it is becoming increasingly clear that extra investment in bricks and mortar, both in terms of new stock and improvements to existing properties is just one part of the solutions needed.

To support this new funding, we need a root and branch review of the bodies, both government and private sector, who are in charge of supporting GROH tenants. This is needed because, frankly, the current system is not fit for purpose; the support is in some areas negligible to non-existent.

Without naming names or identifying the specific area, I can share the tale of neglect, lack of empathy and complete failure of the current system that two or our members have undergone recently. These two members suffered through what they described as a "very nasty" home invasion. They sought support and action from the GROH authorities, asking for urgent improvements in security, including security screens and deadlocks – which should surely be mandatory anyway. No help was forthcoming.

The members asked to be given temporary accommodation or permanent relocation to a different house. No help was forthcoming. Within less than a month the members had their home broken into again. Imagine the completely avoidable trauma and stress this has caused them. Even that second terrible experience has not prompted action by the authorities.

Sadly, what should be a crucial service to attract and retain teachers in remote and regional areas has been reduced thanks to poor support. Literally the only job for GROH providers and the supporting services is to properly and safely house government workers. The state government needs to urgently act to complement the funding decision by making all GROH providers and support staff fully accountable. It needs to be resurrected as an organisation that keeps people securely and safely housed. Over recent years that state government has invested millions of dollars in additional payments to try and encourage teachers to teach in regional and rural areas.

At a time when the cost of living issues faced by country-based staff are being exacerbated by fuel costs that drive up the cost of living in every aspect of life, there is a desperate need to support dedicated educators who are willing to live and work in regional and remote areas. The Cook government has again shown it does react to evidence-based lobbying from the SSTUWA.

Hopefully the Cook government will act to ensure GROH is now reviewed and renewed with an understanding of the crucial role it plays in supporting the delivery of essential public services in regional and remote WA. We hope the government will bring it back into full public ownership and ensure those who run the system and work within it remember it is dealing with people who provide vital services in local communities.

GROH needs to be an absolutely professional and supportive agency to ensure the government's welcome added investment results in more homes, better maintenance and better services to GROH tenants.

This win on GROH further proves the value of the *Facing the Facts* review and the solid foundations it built for advocacy and research-based lobbying. This has delivered much higher investment in infrastructure spending, particularly towards getting air conditioning updates and significant increased spending on school maintenance. That strong SSTUWA advocacy, grounded in proper research, has also delivered significant gains during agreement negotiations.



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