GROH scheme in crisis

By Pat Byrne
President

Western Australia is facing a deepening crisis around Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH), with teachers saying the appalling state of the system is driving many away from the regions and putting others off moving to work in the country.

As the mining boom drives up private rents in some regional areas, teachers are being priced out of the rental market, forcing them to live in caravan parks, share with strangers and in some cases even sleep in swags in school halls or on the floor of other teachers' houses.

The government employees' regional housing scheme, launched in 1964, was originally designed to support the attraction and retention of dedicated professionals to remote and regional WA through the provision of quality, affordable housing.

There have always been issues with the supply, quality and maintenance of this regional housing and the present situation is no different in that respect.

However, in recent years, poor management practices, a lack of maintenance and a failure to invest in new stock has been made worse by the fact that the state government has sold off more than 600 GROH houses in the past four years.

Despite what must be an enormous list of management and maintenance issues, the most recent state budget contained no funding to address either the shortage, or the quality, of GROH accommodation.

The State School Teachers' Union of WA recently asked school leaders, principals and teachers to share their GROH experiences, and we have been shocked by the influx of appalling stories we've received.

Members told us they didn't feel safe in their GROH houses, with break-ins and attempted break-ins due to a lack of security in their homes.

Several teachers said their doors or windows didn't lock properly, others said they waited for weeks for any action to be taken after they'd been broken into, or had attempted break-ins.

Teachers reported moving into homes that were in squalid condition, with excrement found in a bath, mould growing in bathrooms, overflowing internal drains, leaking roofs and decking rotted away.

Other members told us their houses lacked heating or cooling, with some teachers living through summers of 40C+ in the Pilbara or Kimberley without air conditioning because their requests for maintenance hadn't been answered.

One member reported living without hot water for months, with tradesmen organised by GROH reporting the problem had been addressed when it hadn't.

Many of our members expressed their frustration at the lack of communication from the Department of Communities and Housing, with maintenance issues not logged when reported, responses to urgent requests taking weeks and tradesmen either turning up unannounced and disappearing without doing the job or not turning up when they were supposed to.

Several teachers said they had little communication from the department about tenancy start or end dates, meaning some travelled all the way to country towns with their children and pets, only to be told on arrival that their house wasn't ready and they'd have to organise their own accommodation.

Others said they were given little or no warning their tenancy was ending and they were being transferred.

The union also heard several stories of teachers being forced to share GROH accommodation with no consultation, and some teachers being unaware they were being allocated a new housemate until the person turned up on the doorstep.

You can read their stories in full in from page 17 of this issue of Western Teacher.

With a looming skills shortage, which is already being felt in the teaching profession, the government should be doing all it can to attract and retain educators to the regions. Instead, teachers' housing needs are being disregarded and many are living in substandard accommodation.

The management and provision of GROH accommodation needs urgent attention.

The SSTUWA is asking for an immediate review of all aspects of GROH provision and for the state government to properly invest in its public sector professionals who help deliver service and support to regional and remote WA.

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