

ELECTRICITY SUPPLY — CENTRAL WHEATBELT

Grievance

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt) [9.55 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Energy. I speak on behalf of wheatbelt communities that have simply had enough of the ongoing blackouts and brownouts that are causing frustration and anger, significant discomfort and economic loss across our region. I thank the minister for taking the grievance.

Sadly, despite ongoing advocacy from representatives of these communities, some reasonable media coverage and myself as a local member on a number of occasions raising this matter, we are no closer to having a fit-for-purpose electricity network in the wheatbelt. I do think it is unacceptable that in a state as wealthy as Western Australia, in this day and age, we have essential infrastructure that fails regularly. Today I would like to focus on the town of Quairading. But I would like the minister's acknowledgement that I could easily substitute Quairading with Mukinbudin, Bencubbin, Beacon, Wyalkatchem, Nungarin or any number of towns in my electorate. They all suffer.

If we set aside the major storm that went through the wheatbelt and the goldfields in January this year as a significant event—people understand that it was a significant event—the ongoing issue for Quairading is truly a tale of woe. Quairading is 150 kilometres from Perth; it is hardly a remote location. If members read Dylan Caporn's article from last weekend's *The Sunday Times*, they would have learnt that Western Power data shows that for the 2022–23 financial year, the small Quairading community of 582 people endured 16 blackouts, with an average down time of almost three days. The same data shows that there have been 14 outages this year of more than an hour. In 2022, amid ongoing power outages in Quairading, Western Power was forced to install a temporary generator to shore up its supply. It was at that time that I was raising a grievance about this community with the previous Minister for Energy. I am sure that the minister has been advised; the corporation would have provided him with the grievance and *Hansard* of the debate in which I raised these matters with the former minister. Sadly, the first time I raised power issues with that minister, he undertook to meet with me and the communities impacted, but there was no follow-up. It took me raising this issue a second time in Parliament, on behalf of the community, to secure the meeting. Although the minister visited our communities in September 2022, frustratingly, there has been very slow or limited progress on solutions or assistance. My constituents feel that they are not a priority. It is unacceptable that they are strung along with commitments or promises that fail to come to fruition.

I know that Western Power understands the problem. It articulates the problem very succinctly. In a presentation on its website, it identifies that its ageing distribution network is approaching end of life in many areas; that a like-for-like replacement cost can present a significant challenge for the organisation; that small edge-of-grid towns can experience poor reliability, with customers experiencing frequent power interruptions due to stretches of bare overhead conductors sometimes hundreds of kilometres long; and that some rural towns have relatively low peak loads in the order of a few hundred kilowatts and daily average kilowatt per house usage, is a challenge for the organisation. We accept that. It also notes that preliminary feasibility assessments indicate that the rebuilding of the network may incur a higher cost than providing supply to some towns via a disconnected microgrid. I have heard members of the government speak regularly on microgrids. In fact, a number of microgrids are already in place across the state, just none for this community or those that I have raised with the previous Minister for Energy.

I am told that the town of Quairading has been promised a battery, but the promise came with a five-year time line. Can the minister please advise whether there is a solution for the community; and, if so, why it will take five years to deliver? Why has the government announced that it seeks to introduce this microgrid technology at a community level across the state, as I have noted, but there seems to be no solution for Quairading, which has at least a decade of ongoing issues?

As an aside, it was incredibly frustrating to read the transcript of yesterday's debate in the Legislative Council in which a member of the government, Hon Darren West, spoke at length about the benefits of community batteries at Collie and Kwinana when his own community suffers from blackouts and brownouts with no respite or support. It is ridiculous that the solution offered by this member, and I put this genuinely, is that community members should purchase their own generators. I do not think that the minister or his government would think that to be a solution, and certainly our communities do not feel that way when they are paying significant supply and usage charges. They pay their bills, they are connected to the grid, but they are not getting a service that is acceptable.

I put to the government that if there had been 14 blackouts for more than one hour in a metropolitan area, Western Power would have jumped to find and invest in a solution. Why, if the state government has invested in upgrades to the transmission line, the poles and the conductors—I know there has been work done in that part of the state—is Quairading still in the dark? It is affecting people's lives, businesses, safety and morale. I urge the minister today to consider fast-tracking a solution for Quairading because this town has endured more than enough. I seek the minister's commitment to bring forward the time line if the battery storage solution has in fact been committed to or provide the community with a time line and a solution for the alternative. Anything less, the community will feel like it is just being pushed aside by the government as this has just been going on for so long, minister.

I know this is the first time that I have raised this issue with this minister in the Parliament, but I want to make sure that he knows that it is not the first time it has been raised by me as the local member or the community. It feels under pressure. As I say, it is Quairading in this instance, but I could come back every week and provide a grievance for a community suffering from brownouts and blackouts. My inbox is full of emails and letters of concern from communities like Mukinbudin, Beacon and others. But Quairading is on the agenda for today, and I would really like to go back to the community and say that the government is taking this seriously.

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Minister for Energy) [10.02 am]: I thank the member for Central Wheatbelt for the grievance and the very eloquent and passionate case she has put to me. I absolutely recognise the power outages are incredibly frustrating. They are inconvenient, especially as the modern world is so reliant on energy to power devices and communication—a whole range of devices and conveniences are powered by electricity. It is inconvenient, it is annoying and it makes us grumpy; I know that.

We recognise as a government that outages are especially challenging for people in regional and remote parts of Western Australia, including Quairading and the other communities the member mentioned. It is challenging to maintain power supplies. When there are disruptions and outages, it is more difficult and takes time to repair and restore the connections because of the sheer distance involves, which is quite often the issue.

We also recognise that Quairading faces some unique challenges because of its location at the end of a long feeder line. That is not unique—many towns are in that position—but as the member rightly points out, communities at the end of the grid have the issue that there needs to be only one break in that link. They are not networked and there are no other connections at other points coming into the town. With issues in the suburbs, we can almost always get around them because they are on a network. When there is one single line, that line needs to be repaired. There is no other way of getting the electrons there.

Regrettably, these structural factors have contributed to the residents of Quairading having a tough time with power outages lately. I am very aware of the reports in *The West Australian* and, I think, in *The Sunday Times* that in the 13 months to February 2024, there were a total of 16 outages affecting multiple Quairading residents. I think there was a total of 41 outages in that time, but 16 of them affected multiple residents, which meant that the rest were single residents. This does not explain or make it any easier to deal with if you are the single resident! They still lose power, but those figures that include many single-resident outages together paint an inflated or a skewed figure that may suggest to some people that those outages represent an area of people being affected. But I will not argue this point; I will not labour it. If you have your electricity out, it is bloody inconvenient and annoying. I get that. Importantly, a total of 14 of those 41 outages, including to single residences, lasted more than one hour. Most of them had power restored within a one-hour period, but, again, it was inconvenient. I am not sure at what time of the day this occurred, but it is always inconvenient to lose electricity. The outages were often caused by weather. I will not go back to the events in January, but they included that super cell storm that tore across the state on 16 and 17 January. There were other events and failures.

I know the Quairading community can recall the outage back in August 2022. In that instance, severe weather, again, destroyed a pole and caused flooding. This is one example of the difficulties that Western Power often faces. These guys do incredible work in incredible situations and challenging periods. When Western Power crews arrived on site back in August 2022, they saw it was not possible to install a new pole because the ground was flooded and unstable and, obviously, dangerous with water around.

Increasing the resilience of our infrastructure is a key priority for Western Australia and the state government. We know that. We face a challenge with the great transition of our energy supply right across Western Australia. Providing resilience for our regional communities is a huge part of that process. In the period since August 2022, Western Power has invested more than \$1 million in strengthening the network that supplies Quairading—that one community. The member mentioned the follow-up and engagement she had with the former Minister for Energy. I am not sure whether the member is aware of this information, but there has been money and effort involved in improving the network. Western Power has replaced more than 50 poles. There has been the replacement of high-voltage insulators, crossarms and stays. There has been re-tensioning of six bays of conductor. This is critical investment by Western Power to make the system more resilient. The investment is working, in conjunction with reforms initiated by Western Power following the Shepherd report of 2022. In particular, we have seen real benefits from Western Power's new and improved bushfire response. This allows Western Power to get back on a fireground to restore power sooner following an outage, without exposing its crews or the community to the risk of bushfire. Again, there were delays built into the system. This more practical approach will not only keep crews safe when doing their jobs, but also mean that outages will be concluded more rapidly.

Western Power continues to explore network augmentation options, including resilience measures and supply alternatives like standalone power systems. The member might be aware of events across Western Australia—I am thinking of areas around Esperance that were devastated by a massive and tragic fire with loss of life a number of years ago. The response by Horizon Power on that occasion was that reinstalling the old infrastructure, the longlines,

would mean a lot of cost and still have a risk of outages. Therefore, there will be standalone power systems. Solar power, backed up by batteries, has been very well received by many farmers and customers at the end of the line.

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will lose my time; sorry.

We are engaged in a big program of rolling out standalone power systems, both in the Horizon and Western Power jurisdictions. No energy system on earth is invincible, and power outages occur everywhere. We are aware of and addressing these issues. I thank the member.