

Ms Libby Mettam; Ms Mia Davies; Dr David Honey; Mr Shane Love; Ms Simone McGurk; Ms Merome Beard;  
Mr Peter Rundle; Ms Elizabeth Kelsbie; Dr Katrina Stratton; Mr David Scaife; Dr Tony Buti

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## COST OF LIVING

### *Motion*

**MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party)** [4.00 pm]: I move —

That this house calls for the McGowan Labor government to address the impact of increased demand and rising costs of delivery for community organisations supporting WA families through the ongoing cost-of-living emergency.

It is extraordinary that with a government sitting on a \$6 billion surplus we have to bring a motion such as this to this house. The opposition has to raise serious concerns from our electorates and beyond about how Western Australians are struggling with the cost of living, with increased costs of water, car registrations and, importantly, the increased costs for our community service organisations that are tasked with supporting our most vulnerable. Across the electorate and the state, we are seeing an effective cut in services for community organisations that support some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. While the Premier sits on his ever-growing surplus, thanks to record iron ore royalties and the federal government GST fix, it is quite extraordinary that we have to bring a motion to this place imploring the Premier to do the right thing—to take off his rose-coloured glasses, get his head out of his budget papers and look at what is happening on the ground in the community. While he is sipping Grange with property developers in the western suburbs of Perth, many in his own electorate are struggling with basic cost-of-living expenses. While many are struggling to buy food, pay for basic utilities and services and find housing, this government is treating them with indifference. While some are forced to live in their cars or tents with their kids, this Premier stands here day after day talking about the credit rating and a budget surplus, which he has had very little control over, given the royalty windfalls and GST return, thanks to the federal GST fix. This government is so out of touch with reality that it believes a handful of free rapid antigen tests equates to cost-of-living relief. How short that falls when we hear the feedback on the ground amongst community service organisations and those who are doing it tough. We are seeing a new cohort of people who are living in very challenging circumstances, a cohort Anglicare describe as the working poor.

The situation in WA is dire and it is clear that no amount of bureaucratic sugar-coating can hide the acute pressure that many Western Australians and community organisations are facing. We have heard this government use weasel words to explain away the chronic underfunding of services that is pushing many critical support agencies, quite frankly, to the brink.

As one carer succinctly put it, according to my notes —

***When are the people who make decisions and the politicians going to realise this is a crisis? Not a 'shortfall' or 'lack of suitable options'—all those bureaucratic words—but a crisis ...***

The latest statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which were released today, highlight that WA apparently had the lowest consumer price index growth of all jurisdictions, with a 0.5 per cent fall in the last quarter; however, this is being masked by the government's household electricity credit, which saw the electricity subindex fall by 84.3 per cent. There is no doubt that we will see a very different story next quarter.

WA has had the slowest wage growth of all of the states at 2.7 per cent, and a year on year inflation rate of six per cent. We know that there is a housing crisis as much as there is a health crisis in this state. Rents have experienced the second highest annual change in the country with an 8.3 per cent increase in 12 months, compared with 2.8 per cent nationally. Average weekly rent is now \$495, which is an increase of 10 per cent from 2021 and up 39 per cent from 2017. That is for those lucky people who are able to obtain a house. WA's current vacancy rate is 1.1 per cent but in Perth it is even tighter at 0.7 per cent. There has also been a 65 per cent decline in rent listings. They are at a nearly ten-year low, with no signs of easing.

Regional WA is under extraordinary pressure. Rents have grown by 12.8 per cent over the past year to an average of \$440 in June. There will be no relief in the near future. For many this is untenable, and is resulting in a wave of people who have never had to access social services before, and a range of people who I am sure are contacting other electorate officers as well, seeking support for the very first time, particularly for housing.

Figures from the end of July show that the number of people on the public housing waitlist has increased to over 33 570 people. This is an increase of about 2 800 since September last year and 9 600 since June 2020. Of the people on the waitlist, over 8 600 are priority. That is an extraordinary figure and 2 100 applicants have been waiting for over five years to access public housing. There are no significant signs of improvement. This is an issue for not just those individuals, but also, quite clearly, the community services that provide support for these individuals. They are feeling extraordinary pressure. It raises the question again: in a state as prosperous as ours, how is it possible that 33 000 people are on the public housing waitlist? While the government talks about investment and securing tenders for housing sometime in the future, these 33 000 people are waiting, and we know that many of them are

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very desperate. They are more than numbers on a list. They are mothers, like one mother from my electorate, Oceania Harris. She has been a client of Accordwest dating back three years, from April 2019. She periodically reaches out to Accordwest. She has five children. She is on the Department of Communities' housing priority waitlist and she is facing an ongoing battle against the strain on her mental health, with depression and low self-esteem from her struggles. She has applied for over 40 rentals and continues to be declined, including but not limited to Tuart House's women's refuge, caravan parks and budget motels. This mother has advised that she cannot accommodate five children and, when she can, she is charged per child at some of the accommodation, which amounts to about \$900 a week. The accommodation she is seeking is often available only from Monday to Thursday, which is certainly a very desperate situation. I quote from Oceania, according to my notes —

I sleep on a double bed with five children and already suffer from chronic back complications. This is not right. Living in an overcrowded place just to have a roof over our heads.

Unfortunately, Accordwest is unable to assist because it has no transitional housing accommodation in Busselton. It has encouraged her to relocate. Quite obviously, that means she would not have the same community supports, local schooling and options available to support her children. Now Oceania has to choose between a house in another town and keeping her current job and her children at their school.

Accordwest is certainly challenged in the current circumstances in supporting these individuals. It has provided another example. A 29-year-old single mother and her two children had been renting the same property for the last five years in Busselton until the owners made the choice to sell the property. We are hearing this scenario more and more. The mother was unable to secure a new rental property. With the only viable option to move, she had to take up accommodation in another town—in Bunbury. As a result, the mother has lost her employment as an evening cleaner as it was unsafe to leave her children at home. The mother presented to Accordwest, explaining that she had a history of experiencing family and domestic violence and that one of her children had significant behavioural issues requiring specialist support. Accordwest offered the family transitional accommodation in Bunbury. Even though it resulted in the family being displaced from their local community and school, the mother accepted the accommodation, given that it was the only option. Accordwest notes the increase in the number of people having to move outside an area, outside familiar community supports and schooling options, just because of this significant pressure that we are seeing in electorates across the state, but, clearly, I am pointing to my electorate in Vasse, which is under extraordinary pressure. These were examples of just two families. It was not challenging to get this information.

It would be reasonable to expect that, given this crisis, the government expenditure on public housing maintenance and builds to try to address some of these issues would be a priority, but that is not the case. We now have the highest number of vacant social houses since 2019.

I will quote from an ABC article —

As thousands of West Australians linger on the social housing waitlist, almost 2 000 social houses across the state are empty and in need of repairs, maintenance or demolition—more than 25 per cent than last year.

State government data shows there were 1 927 social houses empty in June 2022, compared to 1 514 properties at the same time last year.

It is the highest number of vacant social houses since 2019.

That is according to an ABC article. This government's lack of urgency to address these critical social issues is matched only by the lack of housing stock. As an example in my electorate, the department of housing is managing aged stock with ongoing maintenance issues. Two properties were delivered in the last financial year and there is a site for only five dwellings planned to be delivered in the 2023–24 financial year. Meanwhile, as I have stated, 33 000 people are on the public housing waitlist and there is very little other cost-of-living relief for many people who we have heard about across the state. As stated in my opening remarks, driver's licence fees have gone up by 6.4 per cent. Car registration has gone up by 3.8 per cent under this government. Motor vehicle insurance is up by 2.4 per cent. Water charges are up by 2.5 per cent. The emergency services levy has gone up by five per cent. It has to be done, the government says, but, in return, it offers a \$400 electricity bill credit, capped public transport fares and some free rapid antigen tests. The power rebate is of little value if someone does not have a home or is living in a car or refuge. It is of little value if someone is languishing on the public housing waitlist, like 33 000 Western Australians are. As I said, the power bill rebate is also of little value when someone does not have a home. Cheap or free public transport does not help if someone is living in their car or is living in regional Western Australia.

The cost-of-living crisis is certainly spreading. It is a significant challenge and not only for those who are unemployed or receiving disability, aged-care or Centrelink payments. One of the state's largest community support agencies, Anglicare WA, has reported an alarming increase in the number of people with a job who found their pay was no

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longer sufficient to keep up. Many are seeking help with the basics, such as food. Anglicare referred to the working poor. CEO Mark Glasson told ABC that in June alone, there was a 30 per cent increase in the number of people who were in work but could not afford the essentials in life. I quote —

“Basically, people on the edge of our community are going to be doing without the things that are really essential to a good life,” he said.

...

“Frighteningly, we’re also starting to see now a rapid increase in aged pensioners, people who have worked their whole lives, now not being able to get by because of the increased costs they’re facing.”

The cost-of-living crisis comes on the back of two years of COVID-related closed borders and it is having a flow-on effect, leading to other societal issues. With the escalating pressure that many families are facing, we have also seen a significant increase in the number of cases of family and domestic violence. The *Western Australia Police Force 2021 annual report* points to a 19.3 per cent increase above the five-year average. People in regional areas are three times more likely to be exposed to family and domestic violence—a staggering increase.

What does that mean for the services provided by those vital agencies that are geared to support those people with these hardships? Simply, we are seeing that those agencies are being forced to do more with less. We are also hearing feedback from such agencies on the ground that they are effectively having to cut services or, regrettably, turn people away simply because they cannot keep up. Although demand has undoubtedly ramped up, we are consistently hearing in the feedback that these agencies are not able to keep up with that demand for services. The impact on these agencies is twofold. They are not only dealing with the same escalation in prices for the utilities, food, fuel and wages associated with the clients that they support, but also attempting to deliver services on a funding model that has not kept pace with demand. This has resulted, effectively, in a cut to services at a time when people are feeling most vulnerable. As I said, there is even the working poor. We are talking about community services agencies that are resorting to fundraising and calling for donations from the community because they cannot keep up with demand. They are looking at other options and opportunities to seek support from volunteers as well.

In its brief summary of the issue on 30 August, the Western Australian Council of Social Service stated that the rising cost of living impacts on WA’s community sector in a variety of ways, including increases in the cost of delivering services, fuel, goods from suppliers and rent et cetera. Rising costs compound the challenges faced by tens of thousands of Western Australians who are already struggling to pay for the basics. WACOSS states —

... a significant gap between funding indexation and direct labour cost increases has been a consistent trend for community organisations for years in WA, as service contracts have continued to be rolled over rather than recommissioned.

Its analysis estimates that this has resulted in a gap of 12.75 per cent in the real cost of service delivery. The government will decry this figure and no doubt try to spin the numbers and the fact that there was a one-off sugar hit in the 2019–20 funding year with the supplementation of contracts for that year. When I asked a question on this issue in this place last week, the minister accused me of hysteria and misinformation, which must be a key talking point of this government. The minister stated, “It is ridiculous”, before acknowledging that the labour price index was having an impact on the services. I quote from *Hansard* —

... we gave more emphasis to the consumer price index, as had been requested. Of course, that now presents a challenge for the sector, because in fact there were two components to the indexation—one is the CPI and one is the labour price index—and although when we came into office we were initially asked by the sector to give more emphasis to the CPI, now they want us to have more emphasis on the labour price index, because wages are going up. I understand that circumstances change ...

In her response, the minister also refers to the commissioning work that is being done with those individual and community-based family and domestic violence services that are all part of those negotiations. We certainly welcome that that work is being done, but what we are saying is that there is absolute urgency in trying to ensure that that is a priority because, as I have previously stated in this house, while the commissioning work is being done, the most vulnerable people are being turned away and living in their cars.

WACOSS CEO Louise Giolitto stated —

“Like every industry in WA, the cost of providing these services is going up. And the increase in modern awards by 4.6% is a legal requirement of community service organisations. WACOSS welcomed the increase, as real wages would have slid backwards. However, without appropriate indexation to cover those cost there is a very real risk of services being cut during a time when we are already struggling to meet increased demand.

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WACOSS predicts that unless urgent funding is attained, some of those services will be forced to cut hours, if they have not already done so, which will impact both staff and clients. That prediction is already playing out in many agencies across the state.

Accordwest CEO Evan Nunn stated —

**We are contemplating reduced service centre hours and worst-case scenario, reducing hours of our incredible support workers.**

“This increase will not cover the funding shortfall and will mean we will struggle to provide a baseline level of service to meet the historically high demand that we have sustained over 2 years of the Pandemic.

The overall cost of living, with fuel, food, trades and property maintenance costs increasing, means that community housing providers are struggling. They are struggling to maintain their properties because they are locked into charging rent at 25 per cent of their tenants’ incomes while all other costs go up. Rental income does not cover maintenance, staffing or insurance, which are what Accordwest require to get by. It is absolutely essential for an agency such as that to keep rents affordable, but there is a significant gap and not-for-profits are having to foot the bill.

I have spoken in this place before about the South West Refuge. According to the refuge, it has turned away 340 women and children in the last 12 months because it does not have capacity. This agency relies on fundraising, grants and donations from community organisations to get by and to top up the government funding, just because it cannot keep up. Some of its fantastic programs run at a loss, such as the Safe at Home program, which helps women and children who experience FDV to stay in their home when it is safe to do so. It consistently looks at its services just to keep them operating.

South West Counselling had 462 new clients in the past 12 months, 49 people on the waitlist and a triage for urgent cases. The average number of days on the waitlist is 31. It says that it cannot refer anyone because most other local services or private practitioners are experiencing a three-month waitlist. It is challenged by the fact that the population has increased by about 36 per cent since 2011 and growth is expected to continue in one of the fastest growing areas of the state. Funding cannot accommodate service provision and it is not keeping pace. There has been no significant increase in funding for that organisation in the past 10 years. The only way it is able to cope is to reduce the onsite counselling that it was providing in Donnybrook, Bridgetown and Manjimup. There is no doubt that the increase in population across the region has had and will continue to have an impact on services in the coming years. Unfortunately, the Department of Communities has not increased at the required level of demand, resulting in a range of challenges. I have talked about the significant spike in family and domestic violence cases over the five-year period.

The most troubling aspect of these waitlists is when children and young people cannot be accommodated in counselling as quickly as we would like. According to South West Counselling, the request for counselling for children and young people has increased by 63 per cent in the comparable period in the previous year. That is significant.

The link between housing and mental health is well established. Poor mental health is widely recognised as both a cause and consequence of homelessness. The national Housing and Homelessness Agreement delivered by agencies across the state enables people with mental health issues to be released from hospital into safe accommodation and not be readmitted. Agencies accepting referrals from acute psychiatric units means that beds are available for the next person to be admitted; therefore, readmissions are prevented. One such agency in my electorate that has been providing an invaluable service is Lamp, a program that receives funding from the Department of Communities and employs one person on a 0.5 FTE-basis to support the south west region. The Mental Health Commission provided funding to enable another 0.5 FTE position; therefore, funding the position as one FTE. In 2018, the Mental Health Commission removed the 0.5 FTE from Lamp’s funding and the agency has consistently tried to secure the return of that funding. That is certainly something I have raised in this place. The most recent letter to the minister in September received a response from the chief of staff, not the minister, advising that my request was being considered against other priorities. That service generates savings of between \$500 000 and \$800 000 a year in preventable hospital readmissions and costs only one-tenth of that amount and, of course, supports and assists the overall mental health and wellbeing of the patient who has been released from hospital and has a home to live in.

I turn to transitional accommodation from homelessness to discharge from clinical settings. From 2020 to 2022, Lamp has seen an influx of new homeless or private rental movement escalate continuously. As a result, most clients are waiting in transitional housing for housing opportunities to become available. The minister has spoken in this place about the work she has undertaken with the Centre for Women’s Safety and Wellbeing. Its director, Dr Alison Evans, spoke to ABC news some months ago. Its report states —

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“The sector suffers from chronic underfunding and is always trying to catch up whenever there is increased funding ...

“Additional funding for new initiatives like the hubs doesn’t ameliorate that historic and ongoing underfunding of this sector.

...

Dr Evans said she would have liked to see the government invest some of its multi-billion-dollar surplus to help services address the unmet needs around longer-term recovery for victims.

...

“It’s very difficult when they have to be spending a lot of time trying to get additional grants and things to ensure they can be as responsive as possible.”

It has become increasingly difficult to retain experienced and skilled staff in the current labour market with the increased costs associated with living and that impact is deeply concerning. To quote WACOSS again —

“There is already a real shortage of skilled care staff in social services within our State, and many have left to take up better paying work in other sectors.

“Up to 80% of our industry are women. A consequence of our sector absorbing the deficit in our State Government contracts could result in a cut in hours, therefore reducing wages of essential frontline workers.

It defies belief that at a time when it is acknowledged that cost-of-living demands are having such an enormous impact across the state on our most vulnerable that we are seeing community support agencies affected in this way. It defies belief that the Premier would rather crow about his \$6 billion surplus and free RATs at a time when Western Australians are in most need. While he is sipping Grange, rubbing shoulders with property developers in the western suburbs, out in the community Western Australians are struggling with the housing crisis and with being able to put bread and milk on the table. The opposition brought this motion to the house to implore the Treasurer to consider the people he purports to represent and, importantly, the vital agencies that support them. That is why we encourage the Premier to give an ear to those agencies that are supporting our most vulnerable. To use the words that he most commonly uses himself, it would be the decent thing to do.

**MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Opposition)** [4.38 pm]: I rise to support the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party’s motion —

That this house calls for the McGowan Labor government to address the impact of increased demand and rising costs of delivery for community organisations supporting WA families through the ongoing cost-of-living emergency.

I note the work done by the member for Vasse and wholeheartedly agree that this government is failing to address the cost-of-living emergency that Western Australia is experiencing. There are no two ways about it. Every member in this place would have seen an increased number of people coming into their office seeking support. Certainly all the community service organisations that we have been liaising with, including the peak bodies, have said that they have seen a significant uptick in the number of people turning up on their doorstep. We will keep raising this issue in Parliament until the government admits that it is not doing enough to support individuals and households or the community organisations that support those who are experiencing financial distress, family and domestic violence, mental health distress and food insecurity.

We have just seen the *Foodbank hunger report 2022*, which was released in the last two weeks. One significant driver of food insecurity is that cost-of-living pressure that is forcing families and households to decide whether they can put food on the table, pay their bills or put petrol in their car. There is also housing insecurity. We certainly know that a significant number of people are suffering from this across the entire state.

This is an important motion. We have been raising the cost-of-living issues in the Parliament since the state budget was handed down, when we saw the remarkable surplus that has been delivered that this Treasurer; Premier is sitting on. We have \$6 billion sitting in surplus. I note that the Premier has taken to quite regularly pointing out the fact that we may well be on the cusp of a serious global financial crisis, but that does not stop the government of the day from addressing what is a real challenge right now for the many people who are unable to put a safe roof over their heads or food on the table, pay their bills and live with some dignity.

The workers in those community service organisations that we rely on to provide support and wraparound support to individuals who are suffering from distress are suffering themselves. They are suffering from all the challenges that businesses and individuals are facing. They have seen an uptick in the number of people walking through their doors, they have fewer people working for them, and they have less money to do more with. That puts people who choose to work in this sector under enormous pressure. Talking to them not only in my electorate, but also across

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the state, which I have done over the course of the last 12 months as I travel around, I can see that some of them are at the end of their tether. Clearly, COVID was a really challenging time for parts of that sector. A flow-on effect has come about and workers in those organisations are now under further pressure to try to provide the services that people deserve.

We simply should not have this many people falling through the cracks in a state as wealthy as Western Australia. It is not just us saying that. I raised a question with the Premier last week—in fact, I asked two—in the context of Foodbank and the hunger report, and also comments by the Western Australian Council of Social Service. Rather than acknowledge this, the Premier moved through a number of issues that said to me that the government had ticked the box on addressing cost of living and the stresses that we are seeing, and that there was really nothing more it could do. When the Premier stands and reels off a list of commitments, and compares us with New South Wales and Victoria when it comes to housing costs, which is really quite irrelevant to people living here in Western Australia trying to keep a roof over their heads, it is cold comfort for those who are trying to provide that support. Instead of deflecting, playing politics and denigrating the opposition, which we have become accustomed to, the government should spend time in question time responding to some of these real challenges in a meaningful way. I imagine that would actually give some comfort to those workers who are consistently advocating to government for better service provision and better funding so that they can do the job that they would like to do.

I do not think that the opposition has been unreasonable with the questions we have posed on support for community service organisations or the calls we have made to reduce the pressure on households by freezing fees and charges. There are a number of levers that governments can pull when we find ourselves in these situations, but it is quite clear that this government will not be doing that. Again and again, we have said that the government has the capacity—at the very least, just for 12 months—to freeze fees and charges, to reduce that pressure, and to let people get ahead of the game just a little bit, and that has been rejected by the Premier; Treasurer.

I remind the house of a quote by Louise Giolitto, who is the CEO of the Western Australian Council of Social Service. It is not a historic quote; it is from September this year. I used this quote in question time last week. She said —

“At a time when the cost of non-discretionary items like food, transport and housing are rising at an alarming rate, the state government should be using any surplus money to ease the pain for struggling households,” ...

WACOSS clearly does not think that the government is doing enough. It thinks that more can be done. In addition to this, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia does not think that the government is doing enough. I will come to this in a moment. Those two organisations are calling on the government to address the indexation and financial support to the community service organisation sector. There is more to be done. Regardless of how well the state government thinks it has responded, the feedback from the sector from those on the front line is that there is more to be done.

I hope that the government will not spend the majority of its time responding to this by harking back to the previous government. At some point, a line needs to be drawn in the sand. We are six years into this Labor government, and it is its responsibility, with the finances and set of books it has, to make sure that it is looking after the people of Western Australia now and into the future. It is time to be accountable for the decisions that have been made by this government. I think that the dynamic of threading back to our former government and the blame game with the federal government needs to change and there needs to be some accountability. We now have a Labor federal government, so I would imagine that it will be far harder for those arguments to be made or the buck to be passed across to the federal government. I ask the minister to focus on the situation at hand and at least acknowledge that the issue we are raising is legitimate and relevant, because we are raising exactly the same issue that we know WACOSS, the CCIWA and many other organisations have written to the government about and raised with the minister directly.

If we cannot see that acknowledgement, we are left with belligerence, arrogance and hubris. That is unfortunate, because many people are in pain in WA at the moment. As members can attest when they stand to speak to this motion, many of those people have been through electorate office doors.

I want to read a special bulletin from WACOSS to make sure that this is on the record. This relates to the state sustainable funding survey that it is conducting. This was circulated to members on 17 October 2022. I quote the CEO; she stated —

The current indexation is not fit for purpose and it's left service providers falling behind. A significant gap between funding indexation and direct labour cost increases has been a consistent trend for community organisations for years in WA, as service contracts have continued to be rolled over rather than recommissioned. Our analysis estimates that this has resulted in a gap of 12.75% to the real cost of service delivery.

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We are seeing a rapid increase in demand for services and it is becoming harder and harder to maintain good quality services at the same level with increasing demand and in real terms, declining funding. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to retain experienced and skilled staff in the current labour market and with the increasing cost of living. Other industries can offer better salaries.

WACOSS and CEWA, along with supporting peaks, have established a survey to find evidence to support the sector's ongoing advocacy for an increase in indexation. The State Government increased indexation from 2.55% to 3.53% for 2022/23 (noting it was a one off), and while an increase is an increase, we know it's not going far enough.

WACOSS has written to its members and asked them to provide feedback through this survey, quite clearly establishing that there is a concern across the sector, and clearly asking for feedback to help it continue to mount its case to the government that more needs to be done in indexing and supporting the organisations that fall within that sector. Likewise, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia may well have entered the fray in previous years—I am not sure—but it struck me as interesting that Chris Rodwell, CEO of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia, wrote to Minister Buti, as the Minister for Finance, about indexation policy for the non-government human resources sector. The letter dated 14 September 2022 states —

On 31 August 2022, it was announced that the state government had revised the indexation rate for community service contracts from the 2022/23 financial year from 2.55% to 3.53%. While the increase is an improvement from the initial rate, it still does not go far enough to sufficiently reflect the true increase in costs for organisations in the community services sector.

We note that the formula used to determine the indexation rate was changed in 2019, reverting back to a blended rate of the Wage Price Index (WPI) and Consumer Price Index (CPI) to better reflect the cost increases in the sector.

Last week, the minister spoke about the fact that that had been in response to industry asking for that to be changed. The industry is indicating now that the formula may need to be tweaked. The letter continues —

The most recent national annual wage review saw the national minimum award wages increased by 4.6 per cent, which was significantly greater than the annual percentage increase of 2.7 per cent in Perth's WPI (as at 1 July 2022).

...

We are calling on the Government to:

- Urgently review the inputs used to determine the indexation rate to ensure that they accurately reflect the rising costs faced by community service providers.
- Increase the indexation rate for this financial year and backdate it to 1 July 2022—while the increase to 3.53% was a step in the right direction, it still does not represent the true cost of delivering services to the most vulnerable members of our community.

The ACT, New South Wales and Victoria have recognised the escalating costs faced by organisations in the community services sector and have responded accordingly by implementing indexation rates of 4.43%, 5.5% and 4.6% respectively for the current financial year. The Commonwealth Government has also recognised the importance of proper indexation of grant funding given the recent national minimum wage increase, superannuation guarantee increases and inflationary pressures.

The CCI has also written to the government, recognising that this is an important issue for the government to address, and it has clearly articulated its concerns. The industry and the sector are being asked to do more with less, and the demand for services is increasing rapidly.

Once again, I ask how this can be possible in a state as wealthy as Western Australia. How do we have a \$6 billion surplus but more and more households are unable to pay their bills, fill their cars with petrol, put food on the table or keep a roof over their heads? At that point, you become somebody who walks across the threshold of one of these organisations that is being asked to do more with fewer staff and fewer resources. It is indeed a crisis, members, and it is not restricted to the Perth metropolitan area. We see these impacts of cost-of-living increases and pressures on regional Western Australia as well.

I would like to share with the Parliament some feedback that I have received from service providers around the state. I will start with Desert Blue Connect in Geraldton. This organisation provides men's community intervention programs, women's health programs, domestic violence programs, sexual assault support, children's services, crisis accommodation and rural in-reach to the Midlands, which is in the member for Moore's electorate.

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We discussed the situation that Desert Blue Connect was facing. It said that the indexation rate was welcome—after there had been sector-wide advocacy—and its wages had gone up by 5.1 per cent, but it was now experiencing a funding shortfall. I will let the member for Moore speak more to this example, given that it is in the electorate, but Desert Blue Connect is really struggling. It is a good organisation that has worked hard to try to address some of the challenges that it sees in the region.

The second organisation I will talk about is one that the member for Vasse noted—that is, Accordwest in Bunbury. It provides similar services to Desert Blue Connect. It had a particularly difficult time during COVID. It lost a number of staff members during that time, and those who were left have suffered significant burnout. It has had limited ability to support, recruit or retain new staff at a time when it is trying to deliver more services. Accordwest has explored recruiting people from overseas, but that is an expensive business. Anyone who has been down that pathway will know that it can cost a significant amount.

[Member's time extended.]

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Accordwest is relying on temp agencies and workers to drive in and out to service Bunbury and the surrounds, which is hardly an efficient way to do it. It is inevitable that Accordwest will cut services, and it has foreshadowed that as part of its preparations for its annual report, which will be out shortly. Cutting services will be to the detriment of the community and the state government because I suspect more people will present to government departments, our health system and the housing department. It should not get to that point.

The other organisation I want to speak about is Share and Care Community Services Group in Northam, which I have previously spoken about in this house. Again, Share and Care provides a suite of services that is very similar to Accordwest and Desert Blue Connect. It is a not-for-profit community organisation and has serviced the wheatbelt for a number of decades. Carol Jones-Lummis has been there for nearly 22 years, so she speaks with a great deal of authority and experience. In her words: "I have never seen that this bad." In relation to the indexation of funding, Share and Care is doing its very best to stretch the funding, but it is never adequate and it is inevitable that services will have to be reduced. Carol's reflection on the demand side of the equation, as Share and Care tries to do more with funding that does not cover what it needs to deliver, is that there has been a rise in seniors coming in for food, which she said has been heartbreaking for her staff. Also, an increasing number of people are coming through the door needing financial counselling for mortgage stress. Carol said that within the area they service, which is a large part of the wheatbelt, a growing number of people are living in cars, under bridges and even on school verandas. The lack of housing, particularly in this area, is at crisis levels. I have to say they were regular visitors out to Merredin. I am not sure that they do that as regularly as they used to any longer and that is a challenge because they have had to concentrate their services where they can deliver them in Northam and surrounds.

Carol also reflected on a program that had been run some years ago. As I said, she has been in the sector for 22 years, so she has a memory of the things that have worked. She said that there was a homemaker program that Share and Care started that was taken on by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. It was about making every dollar count. When people are in financial distress, how do they make that food go a little bit further? How do they manage their household budget? How can we put supports around people so they become self-sufficient? How do we prevent people from getting to a crisis point? Carol has consistently maintained that this program should be funded and supported through organisations like Share and Care or Desert Blue Connect. Essentially, she is saying that we should be trying to stop clients falling off the cliff instead of providing emergency crisis support or an ambulance at the bottom. I do not think that that is an unreasonable request.

In Albany, my office spoke to somebody at the Albany Community Foundation. There are a number of these foundations around the state. It is an independent not-for-profit organisation that draws together different community organisations and collaborates with local service providers to try to find gaps and make sure that funding is available. Just last week, the Albany Community Foundation hosted a joint meeting with four of the leading service providers in Albany: Anglicare, Pivot Support Services, Albany Youth Support Association and Palmerston Association. It posed the question: how can they address the current cost-of-living crisis? This is an independent organisation saying, "How do we do this because we know that you are all under pressure?" Anecdotally, from that meeting, all four organisations agreed that there had been a significant uptick in stress, leading to an increased demand for their services. Essentially, we now have the Albany Community Foundation looking to fill a gap to provide support to these organisations to deliver more with less, and it is going to create its own crisis response fund. That is commendable and exceptional, but this is a volunteer organisation that is run on donations and managing investments. I contrast that with a government that has a \$6 billion surplus. I think there is a failing here, when we see so many of these organisations saying exactly the same thing but not getting a response from government to try to ease the pressure.

With the remaining time I have left, I want to go through some of the case studies that have been provided to me by Share and Care. These case studies demonstrate just how complex the issues have become for these organisations to deal with. That complexity inevitably requires more staff time and more resources. It is very challenging



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when these types of cases are walking through the door and there is not the ability to provide them with the support they need.

I turn to the first case study, and of course there are no names. It states —

**Client Profile:** The client is a single woman living alone and receiving Jobseeker Payment from Services Australia, this is her sole income.

**Presenting Financial Situation:** The client is living in a private rental leased through the owner not a real estate agent she is paying \$250 per week rent, she was receiving rent assistance towards this, her landlord now needs to sell the property to pay his own mortgage due to losing his employment. The landlord has given the client 3 months to vacate.

**Financial Counsellor Assistance:** A comprehensive budget was completed, she was referred to our Housing Support program for assistance to apply for a Department of Housing property, the waiting list is approximately 7 years with nothing available in the Wheatbelt. If she does find a property through a real estate agent they can only take 25% of their income which would mean she would need to find a rental for \$100 per week. The client is actively looking for a property privately but to no avail.

**Client Outcome:** The client and her dog will be homeless as of February 2023.

I refer now to the wheatbelt Safe at Home program, and a further case study. It states —

This 60-year-old female client was referred to the Wheatbelt Safe at Home (SAH) program by WAPOL due to family violence inflicted upon her by her adult grandson. SAH staff supported this female with a family violence restraining order (FVRO) application followed by court support where she was granted an Interim FVRO.

...

SAH staff developed a safety plan, increase her home security, and linked her into to psychological and financial counselling.

The client disclosed how she was struggling to purchase basic food items, and that before the increased living costs she was able to manage because of her meticulous budgeting.

The client wept as she explained that after she has paid her utility bills, she has insufficient money to purchase food and regularly goes without meals to ensure her household bills and medical costs are covered.

SAH staff arranged for S&C emergency relief and arranged transport from her friend to access the weekly ‘Soup Kitchen’ at Joseph’s church, in addition access free breakfast at the local park.

The Wheatbelt Safe at Home program continues to assist this client to remain free from family violence and to access weekly food parcels from charities and social services.

Foodbank tells us regularly that these are people who would not ordinarily find themselves walking across the threshold of a community service organisation, but they have found, because they simply cannot make ends meet, that they are now reliant on these organisations to help them navigate and provide support. This goes back to the complexity of this issue, and the fact that there just is not enough money going to these organisations to enable them to support women like this. I have been provided with about seven other case studies, just to demonstrate how complex some of these issues are and what some of the issues are that they are dealing with. I read the summary report that was put together by a group of organisations that operate in this sector, including Mercy Care, Jacaranda Community Centre, Anglicare, Centrecare, WACOSS, Ruah and Wanslea. I think Lotterywest was also involved in the creation of the report. This report essentially goes through interviews with 100 families to talk about the cycle that they find themselves in and how it becomes almost impossible to get out of it if they do not have a number of key factors.

There are multiple and compounding adverse life events that generally mean that it is impossible and they cannot do it without the support of an organisation. The recommendations from this report go back to how important it is to make it as easy as possible for people to access support when they need it and to invest in prevention and early support so that entrenched disadvantage does not become unrecoverable for these individuals. I encourage members who have not read it to read it. It is a significant piece of work, but it goes back to the case that we are bringing to Parliament today. If we do not resource these organisations to provide that support, more and more families will find themselves in situations that are unrecoverable. That cannot be a good outcome for our society, our state government, our community at large and, especially, the individuals affected. I hope the minister is looking at the budget and the surplus and is having conversations with the Treasurer about how we can better support a sector that is so very important to looking after the most vulnerable in our community. Without them, I fear there will be many, many

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more people getting to the point at which they are in an irrecoverable situation, and we should not face that situation in a state like Western Australia, with the immense wealth we have at our fingertips.

**DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe — Leader of the Liberal Party)** [5.06 pm]: I rise to support this important motion moved by the member for Vasse. I want to contribute to the justifiable criticism of this Labor government's failure to respond in a meaningful way to the significant surge in cost-of-living pressures faced by Western Australians, and, I might say, given the themes of the previous two speakers, the impact on local services.

History shows that there has always been modest inflation and that people can manage it. That has certainly been true over the last few years, during which inflation has been extremely low. We also know that there are always households that simply struggle and battle to get from pay packet to pay packet. As was pointed out by both previous speakers, there are all too many people in the community who, in fact, do not have a household, either owned or rented.

This year has been quite exceptional in comparison with the past number of years. We are experiencing a surge of inflation that has been brought on by a number of factors, but there have certainly been some economic shocks. It is the biggest surge in inflation in more than 30 years. The initial rise of inflation stemmed from the impact of COVID in terms of impact on the cost of production of goods and the restriction of the supply of goods and farm produce around the world. The supply chain has continued to see rapidly rising price impacts. Then, of course, we have had the global shock around energy prices, and fuel prices in Western Australia, which I will go into in some detail. There have been some significant rises in household costs. The intrinsic price rises are there because of government, not the impact of any sort of global supply issues. The war in Ukraine has also had an impact.

The combination of those economic factors has really sent economic shockwaves into our community and it has sent inflation rising to the highest rate in more than 30 years. We would probably have to go back to the energy crisis in the 1970s to see a period when prices were rising more sharply. Those pressures from the increasing cost of food, manufactured goods, business imports and transport have been exacerbated by the price rises applied by this government. They are also compounded by price rises in rents and mortgages. I will go on to talk a bit about that because in this state, they come back to the feet of this government as well.

The result of all those factors has been a stellar rise in inflation. I have a chart here going back to 2019. It is stellar; members can see it on this graph. We were sitting at around a one per cent inflation rate, or even below, for a significant time. The latest figures have us sitting at an inflation rate of around seven and a half per cent, or a little bit more. That means that in this state the cost for households is rising at seven times what it has over the past few years. That has caused major difficulties for households. I want to go into a little bit of detail about some of those impacts because I think that sometimes in this place there is a tendency to hear figures and say, "Yes, so what? These are just things that happen." I suspect that although most members of Parliament see those price rises, they are not in the category of people who are in desperate straits.

If we look at housing rates, we see that they were sitting at around four per cent. Of course, those rates went down dramatically the next year. Then what did we see? A massive uptick in mortgage rates in Australia and, as a consequence, in Western Australia. Those mortgage rates have veritably leapt up. According to the Reserve Bank, the mortgage rate averaged 3.1 per cent in March; now it is almost four and a half per cent. That is the minimum rate we face for most houses. That is roughly a 50 per cent increase in mortgage payments for homebuyers. A 1.4 per cent rate, or higher in some cases, means an extra \$7 000 per annum, or some \$140 a week in interest payments on a \$500 000 loan. For any organisation that has a property, a mortgage and loans associated with it, those costs are considerable—\$7 000. Just for an ordinary family, with what is, in fact, below the average mortgage for households in Western Australia, that means \$140 a week. That comes out of someone's budget.

Members in this place will know that mortgage stress is a measure used by banks. Mortgage stress is when a household is spending more than 30 per cent of its income on servicing the mortgage for a house. A household that is sitting on a high level of income has had a 15 per cent increase, on top of the other household inflation figures, so, as we can imagine, that is quite considerable. I will talk a little bit about mortgage stress in terms of the Premier's comparisons with other states. A reasonably contemporaneous article by Miriam Fisher on PerthNow on 4 August referred to mortgage stress in Western Australia. This article went through the RBA figures and referred to the Otivo mortgage stress report. It pointed out that at present, over a quarter of Western Australian homes are facing mortgage stress. That is 250 000 households in Western Australia; given the normal multiplier, that is 500 000 people are being affected by mortgage stress. That is an enormous impact on those households.

I find it fascinating that the Premier talks about this issue in the context of other states. This was outlined by the Leader of the Opposition. To be frank, it does not matter what is happening in New South Wales or Victoria. That has no relevance whatsoever to the 500 000 Western Australians who are worried about whether they can keep their house. They are prioritising what bills they do not pay; they are prioritising the things that they do not buy.

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As I have said in this place before, they are not idle choices. Parents are deciding whether they will eat or the kids will eat, whether they will buy their children shoes, whether their children can participate in school events, and the like. These are everyday distressing decisions facing those families. For the Premier to come in here and say, “Don’t worry. Everything in Western Australia is okay because things might be worse in New South Wales or Victoria”, is gobsmacking, which is a poor choice of words. Nevertheless, it is something that beggars belief because we have a substantial number of people in Western Australia who are affected. This is not just people who cannot get jobs; in many cases, these are people who have jobs.

I will go through a little bit of detail about renting. People who are renting are, essentially, in the same distressing position. The median house rent now sits at \$523 a week. According to Rentwest Solutions, in 2020, it was \$420. That is a 24 and a half per cent increase, or over \$100 a week, just in the past two years. That adds to the other cost-of-living pressures. We have looked at the other impacts. As I have pointed out in this place before, rising fuel prices inevitably hurt the people who are least able to afford them. That is not only due to the fact that fuel prices use up a larger percentage of their income because, as we know, when we move further away from the CBD, at the fringes of Perth there are typically lower socio-economic areas. That means that the people who live furthest away and rely more on vehicles for transport to get to their jobs, in fact, suffer a disproportionately greater impact on the household budget. Looking at average fuel prices from June 2020 to the current day, it was around \$1.20 and maybe ranging up to \$1.30 a litre. Now we have fuel prices that really are approaching \$2 a litre. Again, that is a phenomenal increase; it is effectively a 50 per cent or more increase. For many families, that is another \$60 a week just in fuel costs. The households that are being impacted just by rent and fuel lose \$200 a week. Of course, when we look at surging food prices and the like, that impact increases again.

I know a young couple. They have just gone out and rented their first property. They tried to find a rental property. Again, the Leader of the Opposition has been through the availability of properties in a little bit of detail. One person was studying and the other was working in a typical low-paid job of around \$27 an hour. The lowest rent they could possibly get was \$420 a week. Half of that young couple’s income is going on rent. That is the only choice they have. They either do that, or find a way of bunking in with parents or other relatives or friends. They have no other choice. That is causing enormous distress for the young couple who I know. Of course, there are many other couples who are in an even more invidious position.

As I said, we are experiencing an enormous level of inflationary shock. The Premier has said that he has done everything he possibly can about that. We saw what I have described previously as a sleight of hand by the Premier in offering a \$400 rebate leading into the last federal election. We all know what it was timed for. It was timed to enhance the Labor vote in the state of Western Australia leading into the federal election. The Premier has said that the government has not put up fees and charges because it has given people a \$400 rebate, but, of course, anyone who has read the budget knows that all the underlying fees and charges are increasing; they increased this year and they will effectively increase by the same amount next year. What will that mean? It means that from July next year, households will get a double whammy. In fact, they will see five per cent-plus jumps in one year. That is why I say that the rebate was a sleight of hand. The government has an opportunity to do something about that. The \$400 rebate was in fact worth only \$300, because the underlying fees and charges have gone up, on average, by \$100.

I want to contextualise that \$300 million package with the last time the government sought to entice people to support the Labor Party by offering a rebate. As I have said, the Premier had the audacity to say that his government had done, and I quote —

... “everything we can to make life as easy as possible for West Australians in this difficult environment”.

I ask any person in this place to say that they truly believe that the Premier and his government have done everything they can to make life as easy as possible for Western Australians, because the reality is that the government could do much more.

As I said, we are facing the greatest inflationary shock in our history, but what this state does have is a \$6 billion budget surplus, which is five times greater than the \$1.2 billion budget surplus in 2020–21. Just before the election at that time, when we had a budget surplus of only \$1.2 billion, the government gave households a \$600 electricity credit and froze government charges for that period. The government put forward an \$800 million package when the surplus was estimated to be only \$1.2 billion. Now that we have a surplus of more than \$6 billion, the government has put up a \$300 million package. It appears that prior to an election, the government could contribute a large part of its surplus to try to provide some cost-of-living relief for households, but in the current period, its ability to do that has been suddenly reduced. I hark back to the Premier’s comments about what other states are doing. The other states do not enjoy the revenue stream that we enjoy in this state. That budget surplus has nothing whatsoever to do with any decision made by this government. The budget surplus is the result of two things: one is the GST fix that was put in place by the federal Liberal–National government under the excellent guidance of Hon Mathias Cormann,

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who, as Minister for Finance, worked on that with the Treasurer of the day, and the other, of course, is iron ore and other mineral royalties, which the government has no control over whatsoever.

[Member's time extended.]

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** The government puffs out its chest and says that it did a great job in obtaining that surplus, but it had nothing to do with getting that surplus for the state. Western Australia is in a unique position when compared with the other states on things such as house prices. This state benefits, and will continue to benefit for some time, from not only the GST fix—it will do so for the foreseeable future if we can trust this federal Labor government—but also mineral royalties. We know that mineral prices will come down in the foreseeable future, but we will certainly enjoy royalties for key minerals in the renewables sector for some time. The government could give households one-off relief right now by freezing the massive jump in fees and charges that they will see next year. We have said that it should do that now. It is a one-off step. The government has forecast increases in the forward estimates. Households, who will be on their knees by the middle of next year, will be belted with double the increase that they otherwise would have had because underlying fees and charges have gone up. It is very clear that the government could afford to freeze those increases, and that it should do that. The government has the opportunity to do that.

Going back a little, I said that there is a problem with housing. The government likes to say that it is not its fault and that other factors have caused the problem with the unavailability of properties to buy and rent in this state. One thing that members on this side of the house said to the government once we had got through the initial stage of uncertainty about the COVID-19 pandemic was that it should not stop labour from coming into this state. We said that if the government did that, there would be ongoing economic consequences for the state once the COVID pandemic started to wane. What did the government do? For political purposes—its strong-on-COVID approach—it stopped not only what might be called frivolous travel to the state, which we completely supported because we did not want people coming here for idle reasons, but also workers from coming into the state. We are seeing the consequences of that now. Every sector, but particularly the building sector, simply could not get workers to build homes and do all that work.

I see the Minister for Homelessness on the other side of the chamber, who is intimately involved in housing. A very large percentage of the housing and construction workforce is not the highly skilled trades, but what we would call the semiskilled, or some might say unskilled, workforce. They are the people who do all the important jobs that do not actually require a formal trade certificate or a high degree of training. The government stopped those people from coming here. As an aside, it also stopped doctors and nurses from coming to this state. That was dumbfounding. We wonder why we have a shortage of doctors and nurses in our hospitals when the government stopped them from coming into the state! Everyone in the medical sector whom I spoke to at the time was apoplectic with concern about what that would mean for hospitals following the pandemic, and that has played out; we cannot get the medical professionals we need in our hospitals or to deal with all the state's health issues because this government stopped people from coming here. It took a very long time to remove that restriction. As I said, it was political posturing. We knew we could safely bring a reasonable number of people into the state, but that was not done.

The government could do a lot more than it has done. It could freeze fees and charges, including for power, water and car registration. That would be a fantastic win for Western Australians. It would mean that in the middle of next year, when none of the cost pressures will have gone away and when households will have exhausted their savings, households would not be belted with double the increase in fees and charges that they have seen this year. The government can afford to do that and we are saying that the government should do that. What will the consequences be when that happens? The consequences of people being unable to afford their rent or losing their home because they cannot afford to service their home loan—there is a high probability that house prices will experience deflation—is that they will likely end up without a home and have a significant debt hanging over their head. That means that all those people will put even more pressure on the services that the member for Vasse and the Leader of the Opposition spoke about. Those people desperately need help. They are working but cannot afford anywhere to live; some are living out of their car. We have heard a couple of worrying stories this afternoon about just how dire the situation is for a good number of people. Typically, people with serious mental health conditions or addictions and so on could not afford housing because they found it hard to maintain employment and manage their expenses. However, now we have people who are very capable of doing that and are employed who cannot afford to even provide shelter over their head. We will see more of that, and a contributor to that will be the state government increasing fees and charges next year. That will add to the pressure. As we have already heard, the service organisations themselves are struggling. Many of them are trying to provide for an increased demand but they have less capacity to do that because of the inflationary pressures eating away at their discretionary expenditure.

This government can do more about it. It is not acceptable for the Premier to say that he has done everything he can. It is not acceptable that we see the Premier intercede and come forward with something only when a state or federal election is imminent. That is precisely when the two relief packages were timed. It is readily apparent that

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we have a Premier who is very focused on the political circumstances, ensuring that his popularity remains high and helping his party get re-elected. He is very focused on that, but he is not as genuinely focused on the welfare of Western Australians and the struggle that many Western Australians are facing.

The Labor government has a history of massive fees and charges. In 2017 and 2018, at the start of this Labor government, electricity charges increased by 10.9 per cent and water charges by six per cent. The government thought it would do the old trick of coming in and whacking up the charges and then, as we got closer to the election, it offered a freeze on rebates and said that it had not done so badly, even though all those underlying charges had increased. The supply charges for electricity went up by 95 per cent. The cumulative inflation over the past five years has been 9.8 per cent while at the same time the electricity supply charge went up by 95 per cent. Does an increase in fees to connect sewerage or for the electricity supply charge affect a billionaire living in a house in my electorate? No. They do not even notice it. I doubt they even have to worry themselves about paying those bills because they would employ someone to do it. It is a blip on the landscape for them. However, those fees hurt the people on a low fixed income or in uncertain part-time work the most. Increases to those fixed fees and charges, which no-one in a household can avoid, hurt the poorest people and those most in need. They are the people that the government says it represents, yet it has belted them with these massive increases, and there is literally nothing they can do about it.

We saw the really cruel exercise of the government hitting larger families by increasing a fee to supposedly discourage people from using over 500 kilolitres of water. We have gone through this in some detail. It was a massive increase. All that did was belt large families living in the eastern and northern electorates on the fringes of the city. It was clear from the data that they were hit again. Members in this place now represent the people who paid the most. Many members would know that typically they are the families who can least afford those increases. That was an attack on large families.

As I said, we saw significant increases in wastewater charges. Perhaps the member for Moore might talk about the toilet tax. Again, that was a massive hike on people trying to run small businesses but who are being taxed on every single toilet they have, whether or not a room or a building is occupied. As I have said, we have heard lame excuses from government members who have referred to the Gallop or Court eras and have said that such and such happened. That might make for good politics, a grab or excite some backbenchers who like to hear the government sticking it up—sticking it to, I should correct myself—the opposition, and say various pejorative things about us. However, it offers no solace whatsoever for the people in Western Australia who are suffering from these preventable increases in fees and charges. More particularly, it provides no solace when they hear the Premier say that he has done everything he can when it is quite clear that there is the capacity to provide relief during this period of high inflation. We have heard that inflation might come down in 12 months, but right now households in Western Australia need help. We need help to prevent more people from having to rely on services, and those services themselves are under considerable stress because of inflationary pressures and the increases in fees under this government.

**MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [5.36 pm]: I would like to speak to this very important motion brought to the house by the member for Vasse —

That this house calls for the McGowan Labor government to address the impact of increased demand and rising costs of delivery from community organisations supporting WA families through the ongoing cost-of-living emergency.

I want to speak a little bit about some of the organisations that provide those services in my area and in the state more generally. I have a little bit of a different twist on some of them. The first group I will talk about is Toodyay Locals Care. I have spoken of that organisation before in this house when giving a member's statement about the work done by the locals who volunteer in their town. The group is not seeking government assistance or looking for any regular support from the Department of Communities. They are good-hearted people who are doing their best for their community. They get support from organisations like Bendigo Bank, local businesses and even their local politician, who, from time to time, helps out at its Christmas functions.

I will give members an understanding of the effects on this little organisation that has been caring for people in the community throughout the impact of COVID and now the very steep cost-of-living increases that are affecting families. Many families in Toodyay are not on very high incomes at all. One reason they go there is that, historically, the cost of housing in some of the older parts of town and the outlying areas has been relatively cheap. Sometimes they have been led there by some of the agencies because the cost of living is seen to be cheaper there. Another group is the older group of people who are on a fixed income such as a pension of some sort. They may be age pensioners and there are quite a few veterans out there as well. Over the years, many of them have been helped out by Toodyay Locals Care. Four years ago, when the group that Roz Davidson runs first started cooking to help out local people who may be infirm or unable to afford food, they provided about 10 free frozen meals a week. Now, she is providing in excess of 100 meals a week, with a steep increase in the last six months. Some people in town cannot afford the basics, such as bread and milk. They cannot afford to feed themselves. They cannot afford to put fuel in

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the car to get to job interviews et cetera. Roz knows of 10 or 15 people in town who are living without power and water because they simply cannot afford it. Those people take a frozen meal from Roz's freezer and they use the microwave there to heat it up. If it is a warmer day, sometimes they may take a meal and leave it on the footpath to thaw out in the sun. Some of these people do their washing at the local park and some have been seen taking a wash in the Avon River. That is the scene in a town where people are in real distress. Roz is not calling for assistance from the McGowan government—I do not think she has ever received any assistance from the McGowan government—but that is a sign of the stress that community organisations are feeling throughout the state.

The other community organisations that do a tremendous amount of work in their smaller regional communities and which we on this side of the house value greatly are the community resource centres. Toodyay Community Resource Centre is a case in point. It was on the brink of closure about four to six weeks ago. It was only because the local shire took on its debts and made sure that it had a governance structure in place that it was able to reopen its doors, this time in a building provided by the shire. That organisation assists the many people who come in especially to use the Centrelink facility and access the internet because they do not have access at home. Members should try to conduct their life nowadays without access to the internet; it is not an easy thing to achieve. I am pleased to see that with the help of the shire, which stepped in to fund this centre, that organisation can continue.

Other community resource centres in the electorate are also feeling the stress, such as the Mullewa Community Resource Centre. It has also had to take on the task of providing information to visitors when they flock into town during the wildflower season and, if you like, take up a lot of the resource centre's spare capacity. The centre has to provide for these visitors, which in turn makes it difficult for it to provide for people in the town who need assistance. Again, that is another community under stress caused by a combination of rising costs, which are forcing people in the community to look for help more often, and the Western Australians who have taken to travelling around the countryside, especially during the wildflower season when they are out in their droves. While I am talking about Mullewa, I also visited the Foodbank in Geraldton. At that stage, it was having to make emergency food packages to send to people in Mullewa because they simply did not have enough food to eat and could not access the food they needed locally because the local shops do not have the capacity to provide a full range of groceries. If a person has not got a car to make the trip of more than an hour to Geraldton, it is difficult to get the food staples of life. We have seen that sort of stress playing out.

Again, in that north midlands area of the midwest, the community of Morawa is still recovering from the effects of tropical cyclone Seroja, as are other communities, including Mingenew et cetera. The member for Central Wheatbelt spoke earlier about Desert Blue Connect. That organisation does a tremendous job in providing services in the Morawa area. As the member pointed out, the funding for Desert Blue Connect, which is based roughly in the area of Geraldton, was indexed at 2.55 per cent, but then increased to 3.53 per cent. However, wages have shot up by 5.1 per cent, leading that organisation into funding peril. It is difficult for that organisation to get housing for staff and it cannot find local staff with appropriate qualifications. All these things are happening at a time when there has been a spike in mental health issues caused by the COVID pandemic, combined with people in the area still struggling to recover from cyclone Seroja. This has led to increased demand on that organisation. It has ambitions to set up and create further outreach into the member for North West Central's electorate. No doubt, she will speak about some of the issues facing people in her electorate. I will not be talking about the toilet tax on this occasion, but that has been a topic of great concern in the electorate of the member for North West Central because of the many resorts from Kalbarri to Exmouth and in between and that particular impost on the people living in that area.

At the time the state budget was announced, there was a call from the opposition—I made the call during question time in the chamber—for the Premier to consider an increase in the balance on the Country Age Pension Fuel Card, which provides vital help to people who do not have access to regular public transport. We know that the government has acted. We heard the minister talking in here about how the change to the two-zone cap for public transport has helped in the city, but that is of no assistance if a person lives in Toodyay, Mullewa, Carnarvon or some other place where it is very difficult to —

**Dr A.D. Buti** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** Minister!

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** — take advantage of the two-zone cap.

**Dr A.D. Buti:** What about the airline fees?

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** What about the airlines? Last time I looked, they were not flying to Mullewa. I am speaking about people who do not have access air travel, besides which, going for a holiday in Perth once a year will not provide the essentials that they need to access medical care or food —

**Dr A.D. Buti:** What did you do?

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**Mr R.S. LOVE:** We introduced the Country Age Pension Fuel Card and we increased its balance when it needed to be increased. What has this government done? It has left it where it was. We are lucky the government did not take it away. There was genuine concern that it would be lost, but the Premier refused in this place to—well he did not refuse. As Treasurer, he said he would consider it, but he did not increase the balance on the Country Age Pension Fuel Card. Two years ago, the price of fuel was \$1.17 per litre; now, it is \$1.81 per litre—these are FuelWatch figures. That is a 55 per cent increase in the cost of fuel during that time. What have we seen in terms of an increase in the Country Age Pension Fuel Card? Zilch; nothing! There has been no increase whatsoever. Again, in some instances, if it were not for volunteers and organisations like Foodbank sending out those food packages, I do not know what would happen.

Going back to Toodyay, I know that the local ambulance centre provides a very cost-effective transport alternative for people who need medical treatment in Northam, Midland or Perth. It can access a volunteer-supported car for a reasonable cost. The local ambulance service is a great organisation that provides that vital service in the community. Again, it is people from the community helping themselves without a great deal of government support. When Nationals WA members speak about country people in this place, we are told we are causing a divide. In many of the communities that I represent, even some of the bigger regional centres, there is not the level of government services that members have spoken about. I listened to the member for Vasse, and I have sympathy for some of the concerns that she expressed, but the types of services she spoke about are simply absent in much of my electorate, which is characterised by many small communities, 20-plus local governments and goodness knows how many towns. When the population of a single seat is spread across that many communities, understanding that the communities are quite small, people have to help themselves as much as they can.

People who find it difficult to travel because they do not have access to public transport can use —

**Dr A.D. Buti:** You don't believe in public transport.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** I use public transport. In fact, I travelled back from Geraldton on the Transwa coach a few weeks ago. It was largely due to the fact that Qantas had once again failed to provide a service to the people of Geraldton. Although the government has stumped up some money for people to get flights from Geraldton, it is virtually impossible to take one because the airline has become completely unreliable.

I will talk a little bit about the situation for another group that provides access to transport outside the metropolitan area and in the metropolitan area for people who are not near a Transperth bus route et cetera—that is, taxis. The taxi industry has been crying out for help. It is heavily regulated. Its prices are regulated. I spoke to a group of taxidivers in September who came to a rally at Parliament House to ask for a further increase in the price that they can charge. They were allowed a pay increase of two per cent on 1 August 2022, and a further 4.5 per cent will be allowed from 1 December, but, as I have just outlined to the house, the price of fuel is raging ahead of them. If we look at some of the competing service providers such as Uber, we see that they do not have that level of regulation. I took an Uber not very long ago. When I opened my emails the next day, I saw that Uber had actually charged me more money than it said it was going to charge me because the fuel cost was greater.

**Dr A.D. Buti:** Don't use it if you don't want to.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** I have to use something. I do not have the privilege of a driver being provided to me.

**Dr A.D. Buti** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister! Government members will get their chance. Please continue.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Members on this side of the house do not have the same privileged access to drivers and cars as members of the frontbench. Occasionally I take public transport because it suits and it is the best way to get somewhere, and occasionally I take a taxi or an Uber, or I walk. That is not unusual, so I do not quite know why the minister is shouting across the benches about it.

Getting back to taxidivers, they have been trying to talk to the minister about their issues. For some reason, the Minister for Transport does not seem keen to talk to them directly. I know discussions have taken place with the booking services, but the group of drivers who were outside Parliament House in September have been unable to have a discussion with the minister about their concerns. I think that is disappointing because I am sure they would understand their cost structures and the pressures they are under more than the booking agents. Again, this group of people provides services to people in need. Yes, I know it might sound counterintuitive to ask for an increase in their prices, but if they cannot make a living, they will not continue doing their job. Members might have noticed that nowadays it takes a bit longer to get a taxi or an Uber, and that will only get worse if taxidivers are forced out of the industry because of the cost structures being put in place. Bear in mind, as I say, they are competing against organisations like Uber and to some extent very, very heavily subsidised public transport services. That is a group of people in an industry who really need some consideration into the future.

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I understand that there are examples of community organisations under stress as they seek to provide services that often do not get assistance from the McGowan government commensurate with their need so that they can continue to provide vital services to people in need—people who do not have drivers at their beckoning or a salary no matter what their work circumstances are this week. Outside the rarefied air of this chamber and the environment we live in, people in the real world are doing it tough. We are telling government members that they should recognise that and take some measures, have a heart, and actually help the organisations that help people in our communities.

**MS S.F. McGURK (Fremantle — Minister for Community Services)** [5.56 pm]: I have so much material that it will be difficult to constrain my response to this motion this afternoon. Members opposite have raised a broad range of issues but only some of them relate to the motion before us. The best example of that is the member for Moore’s digression to talk about taxis. In any case, I have enough to counter the opposition’s claim that the McGowan government has failed to address the impact of increased demand and rising costs for community services organisations.

Since coming to government, we have worked very hard to work in partnership with community service organisations—I will talk about how we have done that—because there was a lot of work to do. We needed to undertake a lot of repair work. In fact, when the member for Vasse and the Leader of the Opposition were speaking, I was reminded of when they were in government. I had to smile when the Leader of the Opposition urged us not to think about when they were in government: “Don’t think about that; it’s been a long time. It’s been five and a half years, so please don’t remember it.” It is the elephant in the room that I immediately thought of. I remember a couple of things. One is what happened to utility prices when the Leader of the Opposition was Minister for Water. They went up significantly. We heard frustration, I guess, from opposition members when they talked about what has happened to utility prices under our government. We have been responsible. There is no word other than “responsible” to describe the government’s approach to increased utility prices. The Leader of the Opposition was water minister from December 2013 to March 2017. Over those four years, water prices went up 21.7 per cent. If we compare that with our five years of government, water prices went up 7.1 per cent. Think about that, members. Water prices went up 21.7 per cent over four years when the Leader of the Opposition was water minister. Over the five years we have been in government, they have gone up 7.1 per cent. That is remarkable. When the Leader of the Opposition was water minister, the average annual increase in water charges was 5.4 per cent. Compared with that, on average, the annual increase has been 1.4 per cent under this government. It is night and day. Do not lecture us about what should happen to utility prices now that we are in government because members opposite had an opportunity to demonstrate heart and constraint.

**Mr R.S. Love:** You put them up.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** It was nowhere near the amount the former government did. I am not going to listen to the member for Moore’s interjections.

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** The member for Moore had an opportunity to make a contribution to this debate, and it was embarrassing.

The other thing that is worth talking about when the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister for Water is the former Liberal–National government’s record in responding to members of the public who were experiencing hardship, because what we saw was remarkable. In fact, it is best captured by a headline in *The West Australian* of May 2016, which uses large font and reads “Water Torture”. The article, which was written by Daniel Mercer, states —

More than 10,000 WA households a month were threatened with having their water supplies cut to a trickle last year because they had not paid their bills on time.

Ahead of an inflation-busting 4.5 per cent rise in water prices from July, figures obtained by State Labor show supply restriction notices issued by the Water Corporation have doubled in two years.

Again, the opposition expects us to be lectured about compassion for the community and constraint in utility charges, but when it was in government, its record was cutting off water to an average of 50 households a week. Now, as a result of a compassionate, interventionist and thoughtful policy to understand what hardship was being experienced by households and having conversations with customers to understand what was going on, the number of households that have their water cut off has gone from 2 500 a year to about 800 a year—night and day. This government has not just exercised restraint in increasing utility prices; it has also understood hardship. That is the Leader of the Opposition’s record in government. When she talks to community sector organisations in the regions and her electorate, which she likes to talk about, perhaps she can remind them of that.

It is true that Hon Liza Harvey is no longer in Parliament, but I could not help but smile when someone reminded me of what she said in 2015 when she was the Minister for Police and she was asked whether further support should be given to homelessness services. She said —



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... there is sufficient funding and services available to address the issue of homelessness and there was no need for people to be sleeping on the streets.

An online article states —

The WA Police Minister has come under fire for saying that Government-funded charitable organisations are not doing their job properly if people are homeless.

...

Her comments were in response to the Department of Culture and the Arts' use of a sprinkler system to deter homeless people from sleeping outside the King Street Arts Centre in Perth.

Members might remember that when there were homeless people in the city of Perth and the then member for Scarborough, the Minister for Police, was asked whether there were enough services, she said, "Maybe those services need to do their job properly." The article continues —

"The accommodation is there, the support services are there, the not-for-profit groups are there, the money's flowing into the system ...

"Clearly if there's homeless people sleeping on King Street, those people aren't doing their jobs properly."

That is the opposition's record when it was in government. That is its record of working with the community sector and not properly understanding what was happening. I am very proud of the work that we have done since being in office, in partnership with the community sector, to understand what is happening, repair what was done when the opposition was in government and look at changes so that we are not just doing more of the same. We are looking to reform the system to better support those in need and we are also looking at evidence-based approaches and early intervention. That is what we are doing in government.

I want to make a point about the underpinning theme of us as a government. I was reminded of this during question time today when the Premier talked about our record as a responsible manager of the state's finances and said that we are a competent government. The best thing that we can do for everyone in Western Australia—most of all, for vulnerable Western Australians—is to make sure that we have low unemployment, targeted support, low TAFE fees and dedicated programs, such as the one that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, who is in the chamber today, announced recently, which is a record spend on Aboriginal businesses in this state of \$254 million in one year to 119 Aboriginal-controlled businesses. In four years, we have spent \$821 million on Aboriginal business. This sort of change in policy and direction will deliver meaningful change to families and whole communities. Similarly, the announcement by the Minister for Transport that the first tranche of in-house road maintenance will deliver 41 workers to the wheatbelt and 660 permanent jobs, of which 490 will be in regional WA, resulting in a saving of \$25 million for the Department of Transport. The member for Roe is looking at me with his mouth open; I do not know whether he heard that announcement, but it is significant. It is significant for regional communities and those workers because it will deliver permanent, secure, stable jobs for regional communities, and that is a good thing. We are being good economic managers when headwinds and rough seas have been predicted, as we keep hearing. We are making sure that our finances are in a good state and we are putting good economic policies in place. I will talk about those areas within my portfolio of which I am very proud.

As I said, we had a lot of repair to undertake when we came to government. I want to repeat what we have been able to do with indexation because I remember being in the office of the then chief executive officer of the Western Australian Council of Social Service, Irina Cattalini, when we were in opposition and the former Liberal–National government under Colin Barnett unilaterally changed the indexation measure. At the time, WACOSS thought that it had a good relationship with the Liberal–National government. It thought that things were going well, but when things got tough, guess what? Colin Barnett, the then Premier, stopped talking to WACOSS. I remember that it was surprised about the unilateral change in the indexation method because finances were getting tight and community sector organisations were worse off. We listened to the community sector and changed the indexation measure when we came to government, along the lines that had been requested by the sector.

As we answered in question time recently, we understand that there has been a change in weighting between the consumer price index and wage price index and, therefore, the impact of that change in indexation has been frustrating for the sector. But we have tried to work with it and listen to it, so much so that we have delivered significant boosts. For instance, in 2019 we changed the indexation calculation, delivering an extra \$30 million into the sector. Earlier this year, the sector asked us to change the formula again and the Treasurer agreed to an uplift from 2.55 per cent to 3.53 per cent, which is an injection of just under \$42 million over the next four years. We are listening to the sector; we understand that there are pressures. There were pressures when the opposition was in government and there are pressures now—we understand that. But we are working to respond to those calls. Similarly, there has been an uplift in the base contract funding for contracts established prior to the equal remuneration order in 2012, which has delivered an uplift of \$82 million over five years. I have been intimately involved in those discussions. They

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have been difficult, but we have delivered an increase. Similarly, there has been an additional boost for contracts that did not receive previous supplementation with an uplift of 10 per cent in 2021–22 at a cost of \$14.5 million.

Members opposite, do not tell us that we are not listening and that the government is arrogant and tin eared. We are listening and we are engaged with the sector, which is in stark contrast to their period in government. The Leader of the Opposition was the Minister for Water for a long time. She had an opportunity to better understand households in need and she failed to engage with her agency and deliver better outcomes for struggling families.

**Ms E.J. Kelsbie:** Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker—oh, sorry!

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I have plenty of material, member! I will not take too long.

There are plenty of examples of this. I stood beside the Minister for Finance when we were at the Centre for Women’s Safety and Wellbeing to deliver the new state commissioning strategy for community services with the Department of Finance. The state commissioning strategy and framework sounds a little dry, but it is what the sector had been asking for. It had been asking for a fresh look at the way that the state government engaged in commissioning for a range of non-government organisations in the community sector, whether it was in my portfolio, mental health, parts of health, disability services and the like. A complete rewrite of that whole strategy was undertaken with the engagement of the not-for-profit sector, and it is very happy with the outcome.

One of the key areas that I think will demonstrate this good work is our commitment to engage more fulsomely and deliver better outcomes with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, which I am very focused on in my portfolio of child protection. I think the best way we will get engagement from Aboriginal families is with Aboriginal workers in the government or with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. We have not just said to those organisations, “Here are some of our most complex social problems. Here you go; you do that.” We have given some capacity grants. We have wanted to partner with them and work through those issues, particularly in child protection in early intervention contracts and the out-of-home care services. I think we will see some really good outcomes there. We are working through a range of difficult commissioning processes, again in my portfolio alone, whereby successive contracts have been rolled over each year because all the contracts needed such a root-and-branch examination and it has been difficult to get the clear air to do that. We now have an overriding strategy and we will work with the sector, for instance, in out-of-home care, whether it is on homelessness, family and domestic violence or the like. I think we will see contracts that are more fit for the twenty-first century. Yes, there might be budget implications, but this is not only about the budget. This is also about the way that contracts are managed and the sorts of supports that are needed with the sector.

I could talk about a whole lot of work and our commitment to reform in child protection. We are really working in a very determined, thorough and evidence-based way to make sure we are supporting families to keep children out of child protection and to ensure that Aboriginal children who are in the system stay connected to culture, country and their kin.

[Member’s time extended.]

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** We also support the workforce that is doing that important work. In the previous budget alone, we committed an additional \$114 million to the child protection system and, of that, \$75 million more to fund frontline services to support children in care.

Early intervention will be a hallmark of this government’s change in policy in child protection. Just in the metropolitan–Peel area alone, \$13 million of new money will go to Aboriginal in-home support. The Leader of the Opposition referred to the homemaker program. That program has many mothers; people talk about it being very successful and lay claim to its origins. There is no argument that I hear positive reports of that program. The Aboriginal in-home support service, as I understand it, is quite similar to that and we are getting some good outcomes with between 80 and 90 per cent of the families interacting with that service not having more children come into care. That is really good.

We are looking at reform in relation to Aboriginal family-led decision-making, the therapeutic court and the Children’s Court and Aboriginal representative organisations. We have changed the legislation for that work. With regard to child protection, I could talk at length about the reforms that we are embarking on in domestic violence; we are not just doing more of the same. Members have no idea how triggering it is for me to hear members on the other side say that we should be supporting programs such as Keeping Women Safe in their Homes when the previous federal coalition government stopped that program. In our previous term of government, the federal government stopped its funding to that program altogether. There was not a peep from the other side when the Morrison government stopped federal funding to Keeping Women Safe in their Homes, only to reinstate it a year later with less funding, so the state had to step in, as members opposite always expect us to do. They expected the state to step in and clean up when the former Liberal–National federal government decided to pull the funding.

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We understand that some of those programs are important. Clear reform is happening in homelessness, with an evidence-based approach to tackle some of these complex social issues that, frankly, I think many opposition members have very, very little understanding of. It is easy to talk about headlines. It is easy to describe the problem. We understand that. The solutions, however, are a lot more complex. I urge members to take the time to understand the complexity and the challenges that all jurisdictions have, whether they relate to domestic violence, youth offending and antisocial behaviour or homelessness. I am confident that, as a government, we not only are investing more money, but also are more committed to reform, and that reform is based on collaboration with the sector. It is based on evidence-based approaches and working in partnership with the families and those vulnerable people in the community who deserve our best efforts.

**MS M. BEARD (North West Central)** [6.17 pm]: A common theme we have heard today that no-one would argue with is that Western Australians across the whole state will definitely suffer from the rising cost of living, and we will have to contend with that going forward. There is no doubt the increasing costs of doing business and living in communities will continue to impact each and every one of us and the organisations that support many, many people. But the communities and businesses that also support and underpin the economic growth of the state, towns and communities in regional areas, particularly in the north west, are severely impacted by any cost increases.

I understand that we have capped airfares and there are flights to Perth, but sometimes people who live in the city do not understand that there is no connectivity. Someone who needs to travel to Perth or to Geraldton to get treatment has to fly to Perth or drive to Geraldton. There is no alternative. There is no connection to Geraldton. Lots of these people are pensioners, so one of the things that comes up regularly is the impact of increasing costs, which is going to heighten the stress levels of particularly seniors in regional areas and the groups of people who are already struggling. In lots of cases with these cost increases, mental health also will be an issue.

A lot of the people who use the patient assisted travel scheme and fuel to travel say to me that things have changed and the landscape has changed. The increases are significant. I love coming to Perth because fuel is so cheap. I think today in Carnarvon, diesel fuel is \$2.50, in Exmouth it is around \$2.70 a litre, and it is higher in Tom Price. People in the regions earn the same incomes as people in Perth but incur greater costs. A lot of pensioners and seniors are really struggling, despite the fuel subsidies and the patient assisted travel scheme. The other day I spoke to a man who has to travel to Perth. I think his subsidy is around \$100 a day—\$102. He was unable to find any accommodation that was anywhere near his budget. That seems to be more common, and a lot more people are raising that issue.

The other thing that is hugely important that needs to be noted is that sport is a large part of the fabric of regional towns, as it is in Perth, but it is more prevalent in the regional areas, along with local events and the arts and culture. A lot of these groups are run by volunteers. They rely on any funding that they can get. As a result of the increases in the cost of living, it would be very sad for people if these organisations ceased or regressed. It is crucial that they stay in place as the cost of living gets out of hand. I know that some families struggle to pay the fees for their kids to participate in sport.

It is not only the cost of living that impacts seniors and businesses, but the cost of crime is also having a huge impact on the town. It damages the town's reputation. For example, the seniors' independent living units need security doors, which cost \$1 000 each. Even with the grants, a lot of people cannot afford that. People throughout the town have to replace glass, but we are seeing more and more homes with boards on their windows because people cannot afford the cost of replacing a lot of what needs to be replaced. In addition, insurance premiums are going through the roof and people cannot afford to take out insurance. Last Friday, one man told me that his business no longer insures glass in Carnarvon. These are some of the things that will impact people in the future. It will be tough for people to meet these rising costs. The costs will also rise in the metropolitan area but the problem is exacerbated the further north we go. It also costs people a lot more the further north they drive. The impact on businesses will also be enormous. People's income will potentially be reduced if they cannot afford to travel. If people cannot afford to visit these towns and places in the north, and to a degree the south, it really will have an impact on those businesses that employ people in these towns. The cost of operations, coupled with the challenges of recruiting staff in the regions, with little available housing and increasing crime rates, is clearly an issue that we need to face.

The cost of living is pushing people to lean on support organisations. A lot of these groups are fighting a battle of sustainability. Brenden Law-Davies and his wife Gail, from the Carnarvon Church of Christ, go around town every week sourcing donations of food. I know that they are struggling to keep up with the food parcels that their group of volunteers deliver. It is admirable that they are doing that. Whether it is a small business, a not-for-profit or members of the community, it is important that the government pays attention to the businesses and organisations crying out for the government to acknowledge the cost-of-living emergency, particularly the costs in the regions that are exacerbated due to their geographical location and distance from the metropolitan area.

**MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe)** [6.23 pm]: I, too, rise to respond to the motion moved by the member for Vasse, which recognises the critical state of household budgets across the state. It has been disappointing to listen to the Premier during question time. As pointed out by the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Cottesloe, every time

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the Leader of the Opposition asks the Premier about Foodbank or Anglicare and what he is doing to help out those less fortunate than ourselves—those living in poverty; those who cannot put a meal on the table—all he seems to want to talk about is the worldwide recession that is coming up. We get criticised by the government for talking down the economy, and when we ask what the Premier will do to help those people who are struggling, we get this information about the worldwide recession and that he has to keep \$6 billion up his sleeve just in case we have a worldwide recession.

The job of the Premier; Treasurer is to look after those less fortunate, especially in times like these when poverty is rising to the surface. We have seen interest rates going up. A lot of people were geared up on those lower interest rates and all of a sudden that slight mortgage fluctuation and the rise in rental rates has changed the whole scenario. People who were not expecting it and who have never been in that situation have been thrown into a totally different scenario and they are struggling.

The October 2022 report *Poverty in Australia 2022: a snapshot* gave an overview of the situation after COVID, saying it had a big impact. I will quote some of the statistics from the report —

- More than one in eight people in Australia (13.4%) lived below the poverty line in 2019–20, the first year of the pandemic. That amounts to 3,319,000 people.
- One in six children (16.6%) live in poverty. That amounts to 761,000 children.
- ...
- Average weekly incomes of people in poverty (from different-sized families) are \$304 below the poverty line. This is known as the poverty gap.

We know that available public and private housing in the regional areas is almost non-existent. I say to the member for Cottesloe that if we have spoken about it once, we have spoken about it 10 times. It does not seem to be getting through. I can assure members that in my electorate, people are living in cars and garden sheds. They are even paying rent to live in garden sheds. That is quite disturbing. When we look at some of these applications for rentals, Dutch auctions are almost taking place. People are being forced out of rentals, with increases of \$200 and \$300 a week, sometimes twice a year.

I turn to some local examples. Financial counsellors are reporting an increase in assistance to purchase gas bottles. People cannot afford to replace gas bottles, so they go without hot water for a month or more while they seek assistance. As I said, the money that people need to pay for the increases in their mortgage or rent comes from the bucket of money they use for their food. People are not paying sports fees for their children because they need that money to buy food. I stood in this place a couple of times last year asking the former Minister for Sport and Recreation and the current minister why they would not increase funding for KidSport, a program that was introduced by “Tuck” Waldron. As the Leader of the Opposition knows, it was one of the signature programs introduced by the previous Liberal–National government. “Tuck” Waldron was the instigator of KidSport. I could not seem to get the former Minister for Sport and Recreation or the current minister to understand how important that program is and how important it is to increase funding so that our kids have the opportunity to play sport. Last night we had a function for the Parliamentary Friends of the Olympic and Paralympic Movements in Western Australia. The overriding message that came out is how important sport is to children in our society and how it is great that they can look at our elite athletes in an aspirational way and see how their hard work has taken them to that level. That came through from several of the speakers last night. I reiterate that at times like this, an increase in funding to KidSport is very important.

One thing we are seeing more and more is animals being given up to pet havens and regional vet clinics because their owners cannot afford to feed them.

**Dr A.D. Buti:** You don’t believe in looking after pets. You had a go when we put up a nice park for pets. You had a go at that, even though you did one yourself up north.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I am still not happy with the Armadale dog park, but that is another story. The Armadale dog park was one of the first things that this government brought in. I think it has learnt, as it has gone along, that there are probably more important things, such as this very serious subject of food shortages and the like. The Premier; Treasurer needs to take this on board. When the Leader of the Opposition asks a serious question about Foodbank and Anglicare, the Premier needs to stop talking about New South Wales and Victoria and about how much better off we are than them and how there is going to be a worldwide recession that he needs to keep that \$6 billion in his pocket for, and actually start looking after our vulnerable people.

I have spoken to the wonderful volunteers at the Katanning Neighbourhood Centre, Community Harvest, which offers cheap food and household items to people in need. They told me that the number of families coming through their door has really increased this year. More and more families are coming in with food vouchers from Anglicare and no money at all. They do not turn anyone away. They rely solely on donations to provide for the community. All fruit

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and vegetables at Community Harvest are donated by Woolworths, and the centre charges only \$1.50 a kilo for them. Families know that they can come in and buy food for the week for around \$70. Without this service, those families and their children would be going without food. Katanning is very lucky to have this organisation, and I congratulate anyone and everyone who is involved in it because they are doing a great job.

Esperance is another town in my electorate. Chris and Sue Meyer have done a fantastic job with Esperance Care Services over the years. Chris reported that their service had seen increased demand over the last few weeks. When it was closed for one day, there was a queue at the door the next morning. That is an indication of what is happening. There is a higher-than-usual demand for advocacy provided by Esperance Care Services, which helps people to deal with Centrelink and the like. Esperance Care Services is now seeking funding to help meet that high demand. Esperance Care Services does a great job. Esperance does not have a food bank, so those in desperate need have few avenues for crisis support and cheap food options.

All of our speakers have spoken about the high cost of fuel and the rising cost of living in our regional areas. If someone who lives in Esperance has to go to a specialist appointment in Perth, they face not only a nine-hour drive but also a \$200 or \$300 cost for fuel, both on the way there and on the way back. As the member for Moore pointed out earlier, the McGowan government has not kept up with the times with the Country Age Pension Fuel Card or the patient assisted travel scheme. I spoke with someone from Gnowangerup about the fuel card when I was at the Katanning Show on the weekend. It is pretty frustrating, as they cannot get their card accepted anywhere in Gnowangerup because there is not a live fuel station there. They now have to spend money driving to another town to get their fuel card accepted. That is another element.

I spoke to a primary school teacher from my electorate yesterday about the breakfast club at their school. More and more children are coming to school having had no breakfast and with no lunch packed. Breakfast programs have become almost an essential part of the daily school program. I am sure the Leader of the Opposition faces the same things right throughout her electorate. Things like swimming lessons are being let go, because families cannot afford \$31 for each child or \$83 for the family to go to VacSwim. Over the next few weeks, I will be looking at the breakdown in where VacSwim services are being offered. It unfortunately appears that some of the people who are administering the program do not actually understand that when the program in one town is full, they cannot just recommend that people go to Hyden, 200-and-something kilometres away. They need to get out a map and see what is going on. VacSwim is important for families and children right throughout Western Australia as it is important that people learn how to swim.

Fuel prices, especially for diesel, have gone up substantially; it is up to around \$2.43 a litre for diesel at the moment. I was very concerned about this and I asked the Minister for Commerce a question about FuelWatch, or “Fuel Do Nothing” as I prefer to call it, because watch is all it does. It does not do anything. I asked the Minister for Commerce to use some of his powers to do something about price gouging and the like, but, as usual, he skirted around the subject. It is very hard to pinpoint what FuelWatch has actually done, except to watch the price.

The fact that people are under pressure has again been highlighted this week, with people abandoning their cars at repairers. When someone has to abandon their car because they cannot pay the repair costs, that tells us something about what is happening in our community at the moment and the impact of cost-of-living pressures. As I said, I would like the Premier to recognise how tough families are doing it out there, instead of just blowing it off and talking about the worldwide recession that is coming up. It is not good enough.

**MS E.J. KELSBIE (Warren–Blackwood)** [6.37 pm]: Supporting families is at the heart of what the McGowan government does. Community is a core Labor value; we value our communities and our families. Our families are the bedrock of our communities, and we need to nurture, protect and support them. Our government supports Western Australian families and communities in so many ways, unlike the Liberals and Nationals, who are out of touch and desperately trying to remain relevant to Western Australians today. Look around you, members; look at the void. They are out of touch. Nine per cent says a lot.

I stand here today proud to be a strong voice for regional WA, and especially for my electorate of Warren–Blackwood. I am proud to be part of the McGowan Labor government. Our government continues to empower and support communities and families to improve child development and early learning outcomes across Western Australia. The early childhood education and care sector has been critical in supporting WA families during the COVID pandemic and beyond. Early childhood education and care services are important not only for children’s socialisation and education, but also because they support parents, especially women, to return to work. We know that regional towns can face greater challenges in finding workers, and that the choice of early education services on offer can be limited. The McGowan government is delivering a \$5.1 million commitment for a range of initiatives aimed at improving access to child care in regional WA because it knows how vital it is that children have access to early learning. The commitment includes \$4.1 million to support the viability of regional child care by working with regional providers to make child care more accessible and affordable to local families, and a \$1 million capped grant fund to support regional local government authorities attract and retain childcare workers in regional Western Australia.

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As a working mum, I understand how important quality child care is to families. Just this week, I visited and hung out with the Mt Barker Playgroup, which is a community organisation. I met a dedicated groups of mums. I am sure dads also use the facility, but on the Monday it was the mums. We talked about how important facilities and community groups like that are to them and their communities. Overwhelmingly, their response was positive. I am really proud to support that community organisation with an election commitment to help it purchase new toys, equipment and storage. That is on-the-ground support from their local member to help the group carry on the important business of connecting and supporting the mums, dads, carers and kids in Mt Barker.

I also understand the need for affordable and accessible child care. I am incredibly proud to support another community organisation, Augusta and Districts Community Childcare, situated just over three hours away from Mt Barker on the other side of my electorate. I am proud to support and advocate for the Augusta community and for Augusta and Districts Community Childcare. I am proud of my election commitment to assist that organisation. Yes, we are supporting and assisting community organisations on the ground. I am from the sector as well. As a former CEO of a community organisation, I fully understand how important community organisations are. As someone who has managed and run community organisations, I value our government's commitment to supporting the sector. Again, that is experience I have had firsthand.

I will talk about TAFE. Let us talk about the McGowan Labor government making TAFE accessible, affordable and better targeted to assist people engage, get support and secure jobs. Let us talk about the McGowan Labor government investing in our community, especially regional communities, and creating pathways for people of all ages to gain work-ready skills. I am proud that in addition to making TAFE more accessible across the board, the McGowan government has reduced course fees for TAFE childcare courses with the aim of increasing the supply of early childhood educators across Western Australia. The McGowan government recognises that the care sector is a fundamental part of our state's continuing economic recovery, which is why the Lower Fees, Local Skills program continues to be an integral part of the government's work to make child care more accessible and affordable for families across the state. Last year, we announced that child care was the centrepiece of the joint state and commonwealth governments' \$103.5 million training expansion, which will see child care, age and disability care, and civil construction workers able to save thousands of dollars for upskilling.

Access to twenty-first century telecommunications is also critical to support rural women fully participate in the economy and have the same opportunities as women in the city. It allows for workplace flexibility, which is also important for women in rural and remote areas so they can participate in the workforce and be involved in their local communities, including local community organisations. The McGowan government has committed more than \$50 million over the past five years to reduce the digital divide in regional WA and help roll out better digital infrastructure on farms and towns across the state. We are also making an unprecedented \$49.3 million investment in the Early Years Initiative—the first project of its kind in WA—with the Early Years Partnership. This government knows how critical the early years are, which is why the McGowan government announced its commitment to the Early Years Partnership. The program focuses on place-based solutions and grassroots community work to improve local outcomes. I vehemently reject the motion. I feel it is nonsense.

**DR K. STRATTON (Nedlands)** [6.43 pm]: I, too, stand in opposition to this motion. I want to very briefly highlight two recent McGowan government initiatives in two areas that I am very passionate about for two very vulnerable groups in our community. I will start by talking about grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. That is the fastest growing form of out-of-home care for vulnerable children in our community. Grandparents step up to provide safe and secure care for their grandchildren in a house and with a family in which the children are already known and loved. It is a significant responsibility that helps children maintain critical family connections and keeps them safe in culture, maintaining their family history and identity. When grandparents step up to care for their grandchildren, they not only create a better life for their grandchildren, but also make a very significant contribution to our community. When it comes to supporting the community and the community services sector, I know how important it is that we support diverse and unique groups in our community, such as those who raise their grandchildren. Last week, in my role as co-convenor of the Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent Carers, we welcomed Western Australian Senior of the Year, Jan Standen, and other grandcarers here to Parliament House to acknowledge their extraordinary work. Jan's achievements in the role were publicly celebrated by the Premier and Minister for Community Services; Child Protection. Prior to entering Parliament, when I was the manager for research and evaluation at Wanslea, we undertook significant research that looked at the impact of the caring role on grandparent carers. Although they reported on the joy and satisfaction they derive from their caring role, they also talked about the challenges they experience in their own social, physical, mental and financial health. We launched the final report of that research, *A fairer future for grandchildren*, last year. The Minister for Community Services; Child Protection, Simone McGurk, helped to launch this report, having previously received a number of delegations from Wanslea and grandparent carers.

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I share the story of last week's celebration of Jan and the minister's engagement with that research to tell members that as somebody who comes from the community services sector, this is a government that listens. It listens to evidence. It hears the struggles of people who are doing so much for our community, and it is a government that responds to those needs. Our government made an election commitment in 2021 to increase payments to eligible grandparent carers registered with the grandcarers support scheme, administered by Wanslea. It increased it to being an annual payment of \$1 000 for each child in a grandparent's care. It is an annual payment designed to help with the demands and financial pressures that full-time caring brings. This increase more than tripled the amount of funding provided to the average grandparent carer looking after two children. These payments commenced in November last year, with the annual rate backdated to 1 July so that no grandparent carer who had already received a payment within that financial year would miss out on the increased amount.

Having been involved in the evaluation of the pilot of the grandcarer support scheme, I know that it was used to meet the costs of daily living—food, bills and school supplies. For most grandparent carers, it was also an important recognition of their role. This payment goes directly to alleviating the cost-of-living pressures for grandparent carers, usually older women in their 60s. The McGowan Labor government, as I said, has now tripled that support, that relief, to the cost of living for this amazing group of carers who do so much for our community.

The second initiative of the McGowan Labor government to address the cost of living and support our education providers that I want to refer to is the very recent announcement that period products will be provided in every Western Australian public high school. Again, this was an initiative from a government that listens to the evidence, listens to the community and responds. Like many of my colleagues in this place and the other house, schools in my electorate spoke to me about the need for period products to be provided to reduce both the cost and stigma for menstruating students in accessing these necessary health items. Period products are a fundamental health necessity, but the cost and the stigma associated means that many students do not have access to them while they are at school. The 2021 Bloody Big Survey found that almost half of the 125 000 people who participated missed a class due to their period. Three-quarters of respondents said that when they did attend school during their period, they found it difficult to pay attention. Other evidence tells us that improving access to tampons, pads and other menstruation products keeps students engaged in education, improves public health outcomes and helps them reach their full potential. It also ensures that students have the support they need, with dignity and without financial barriers.

By openly discussing periods and other reproductive health issues, we are also reducing the taboo and stigma around women's health issues. In August this year, the McGowan government committed to provide access to free period products for secondary students. Again, I thank the Minister for Women's Interests and the Minister for Education and Training for responding to the evidence, for listening to the needs of menstruating students and their families, and making a real difference to the day-to-day lives of people. More than 220 public schools will be provided with free period products from next year, with the McGowan government initiative to be rolled out from term 1 in the 2023 school year. A procurement process will soon get underway for this kind of policy change that delivers fast, meaningful relief to young people and their families.

I strongly oppose this motion and instead give thanks for a government that listens to evidence, listens to the needs in our community and actively and quickly responds.

**MR D.A.E. SCAIFE (Cockburn)** [6.49 pm]: We did not learn much today from the contributions of opposition members to this debate, but one thing we did learn was their strategy for the next election. Their strategy is clearly to bore us all to death in this chamber, because they have realised they cannot beat us in an electoral contest. That was an absolutely terrible, lacklustre, boring, lifeless performance from the opposition. If these are the people who the battlers of Western Australia are supposed to be hoping will save them, God help us all!

Several members interjected.

**Mr D.A.E. SCAIFE:** They have to dig deeper. I know they have a tough job, but they have to dig deeper if they are going to stand up for the working people of Western Australia. Clearly, opposition members do not have it in them. Their contributions were totally lifeless. They have to show some energy on these issues. They are also all over the place on these issues.

**Ms M.J. Davies** interjected.

**Mr D.A.E. SCAIFE:** I did not interject on any members of the opposition while they waffled on for hours on end, wasting not only our time but also —

**Ms M.J. Davies:** No, but if you're going to serve it up, you can take it back.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Leader of the Opposition!

**Mr D.A.E. SCAIFE:** The Leader of the Opposition should have better manners than to interject after I sat in silence during the opposition's absolute garbage contributions. The opposition is all over the place. The member for Cottesloe

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came in here and said, “We’re facing an inflation crisis. It’s the highest rate of inflation in 30 years.” That is entirely true, but do members know what is the single biggest inflationary measure that a government can take? It is to go into budget deficit. Budget surpluses are deflationary. They mean that there is less money circulating through the economy and driving up demand. They have a deflationary effect. Opposition members engage in this sort of voodoo economics in which their response to an inflation crisis is to increase spending and make the inflation crisis worse for working people. It is so ridiculous. The opposition also criticised us for giving out a \$400 electricity credit, which was an attempt by this government to provide relief to people who are struggling. Opposition members want to walk both sides of the street and they cannot do it. They cannot have their cake and eat it too. It is not true that this government has not acted on the cost-of-living situation. We have limited fee increases for electricity, water and public transport to less than inflation for consecutive years. We have also driven down government fees and charges by 3.8 per cent in this budget. We have taken measures that are responsible and directly within the government’s control to provide cost-of-living relief to residents of this state.

Members opposite do not have an alternative proposition. All they do is speak about a surplus as though it is money locked away in a bank account somewhere. I heard the Leader of the Opposition talk about “sitting” on a surplus, as though there is a hoard of treasure somewhere. That is not even how a budget surplus works. I think it is clear that the opposition generally does not understand budgets. It is a good thing for the government to have a surplus during good, prosperous economic times to put downward pressure on inflation and prepare us for difficult economic times when the government might have to spend in order to support demand. Until opposition members learn a little bit about economics and about the state of Western Australia’s finances, they will continue to be a lacklustre opposition and the people of Western Australia will not look to them to be the alternative government.

**DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale — Minister for Finance)** [6.53 pm]: I echo and agree with all the remarks made by the previous speakers—the member for Cockburn, the member for Nedlands and the member for Warren–Blackwood. The Leader of the Opposition has done well to be here today. I am sure she is very tired; she looks very tired, so it is great she made it here today. I will not criticise her for the contributions made by opposition members to this debate, but they were quite appalling. I think the member for Cockburn’s description of the opposition’s expertise was rather accurate. I think even former Prime Minister Liz Truss, the shortest-serving Prime Minister in UK history, would say the opposition’s economics leave a little to be desired. When members of the Nationals WA are on their feet speaking, we are reminded that they are the most secular agrarian socialist party in Australia. They believe that governments should just spend, spend, spend, but it is always on their pet projects. It is a bit confusing, because the Deputy Leader of the Opposition said that he took public transport—he got on a bus from Geraldton. That is great! Is that the only time he has used public transport—that one time—or has he done it at other times?

**Mr R.S. Love:** Do you want me to answer that or will I be accused of interjecting?

**Dr A.D. BUTI:** No; go on.

**Mr R.S. Love:** I am a frequent user of public transport.

**Dr A.D. BUTI:** That is good. Therefore, the member would be a champion of the state government’s Metronet program. He would not, of course, be a supporter of the Liberal Party’s anti-public transport stance. It is the party that closed the Fremantle–Perth railway line. It was so close to selling that land. Can members imagine if we did not have the Fremantle–Perth railway line today? Thank goodness the Liberal Party did not sell it off, and it was a Labor government that brought it back online.

The member for Cockburn mentioned some of the things we have done, as did the member for Warren–Blackwood and the member for Nedlands. Members opposite did not talk about the \$600 household electricity credit or the \$400 household electricity credit in the 2022–23 budget. They did not talk about the energy assistance payment of \$305. They did not talk about the housing grant schemes and payments that have been put in place. The Minister for Community Services talked about the state commissioning strategy for community services. The community services sector has been crying out for this commissioning strategy. I am sure that members opposite have studied the strategy in some detail. If they have, they will understand why it is good for the community services sector to have this commissioning strategy. But they did not talk about that. They did not talk about the funding of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. We are investing in ACCOs. We are investing money to allow Aboriginal people to have greater say on, and control over, the services that are provided to Aboriginal people. They did not mention that. They did not mention the fact that we have also put in funding for the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia; \$275 000 in grants have been given to the Youth Affairs Council. They did not mention those things. They did not mention what the Minister for Community Services mentioned about the Aboriginal procurement policy. That has been significant in improving the economic outcomes for Aboriginal people—to close the gap.

It is very easy for members to stand and talk about a few dollars here and there without looking at the economic cost of what they want to put in place. As the member for Cockburn said, we are in a high inflationary situation. The world is in a high inflationary situation. Members do not agree with what we want to do, but if we put in place



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what they want, which is to spend, spend, spend without any fiscal restraint or discipline, the inflationary stimulus that that would place on the economy would ensure that inflation would rise to over 10 per cent. The member for Roe talked about interest rate hikes. He would see nothing if inflation rose to over 10 per cent. That is what would happen under the opposition's policy. All it does is spend, spend, spend. I can tell the member for Cottesloe that the inflation rate under his policy would be higher than his approval rate! No increase in interest rates is going to increase his approval rate of nine per cent.

**Dr D.J. Honey:** You're very unkind!

**Dr A.D. BUTI:** That was not bad. You have to admit that was pretty good!

When opposition members get up and talk about cost-of-living relief, they have to be honest and they have to talk about what this government has done. One of the best things to do to enable people to deal with cost-of-living pressures is to ensure that they have jobs. Even the member cannot deny that the state's economy has been well run in the last two to three years. We have the lowest unemployment rate and Perth is the cheapest capital city to buy a house. People can get a job anywhere they want, and that obviously has economic benefits for people. Members opposite should not use the agrarian socialist party agenda—the Liz Truss agenda—which is to ruin the economy and increase debt, as it would only cause inflation and interest rates to increase.

Many of the member for Roe's constituents in the country are farmers who have great borrowings with high interest rates. Their interest rates would go through the roof under the opposition's policies. His hypocrisy when he had a go at the Armadale dog park was amazing, when he did one up near Newman that has National Party paraphernalia at the front. There is nothing wrong with dog parks; they are really good. There is nothing wrong with looking after animals. I assume that, as a farmer, the member would have a great love of animals and that he would care about animals. I do not see a problem with having a dog park.

Members also talked about helping people.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

*House adjourned at 7.00 pm*

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