

WATER CORPORATION — HARDSHIP MEASURES

635. Ms L.L. BAKER to the Minister for Water:

Could the minister please outline to the house how the McGowan Labor government's compassionate approach to dealing with vulnerable Water Corporation customers is providing support for those in genuine financial hardship?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for her question and her concern about the procedures that we have put in place since we came to government to assist people in paying their water bills. I want to congratulate the Water Corporation for the way it has dealt with this. I have reported on this in the Parliament before, but I want to give the member an update based on the latest figures for the last financial year. To put this in context, when we came into government, 2 467 Water Corporation customers had their water restricted—reduced to a trickle—in 2016–17 for non-payment of their water bills. That means that every working day, nine Western Australian families had their water service restricted—reduced to a trickle—because they could not pay their bills. That was of concern to me. People have to pay their bills, but that is quite drastic action.

We asked the Water Corporation to come up with a different way of dealing with those customers. In the 2018–19 financial year just completed, that number was 797. That is a 70 per cent reduction in the number of families who had their water restricted. That is a major change and has assisted families in hardship in Western Australia. It has been an effort across Western Australia. I will just say that in 2016–17, in the Agricultural Region—the previous Minister for Water might be interested in this—130 families had their water restricted. In the last financial year, that figure was 32, so that is a 75 per cent reduction in the Agricultural Region because of the more constructive and proactive way that we have been dealing with this issue. Members might be interested to know that in the last seven months of the last financial year, not a single family in the Agricultural Region had their water restricted—not a single family. In the south west in 2016–17, 266 families had their water restricted; in the last financial year, the number was 21. That is a 92 per cent reduction in the number of families who have had their water restricted. The member for Warren–Blackwood might be interested in that. Again, in the last seven months of last financial year, not a single family in the south west had their water restricted because they could not pay their bills. That is a major change. By that measure of the number of families who have had their water restricted, the Water Corporation is now doing better. If we compare the number of customers on payment plans in 2018–19 compared with 2016–17, it is down by 28 per cent. The number of overdue notices was down 25 per cent in the 2018 calendar year compared with 2016. This is the one I like best: the number of customers for whom the Water Corporation has resorted to court action to recover unpaid bills has gone from 913 in 2016–17 to 51 in 2018–19, which is a 95 per cent reduction. When I asked the Water Corporation why it did that, I was told that taking people to court was just unproductive—it did not produce the result, it was expensive and the Water Corporation did not get its money back. There are other ways of dealing with this issue.

Members on this side of the house are really pleased. People are still paying their bills, but we realise that some families find it difficult at times to meet their obligations, due to whatever circumstances. By the Water Corporation being proactive and sensitive and working with customers in difficulty, customers can pay their bills without undue hardship. I congratulate the Water Corporation and its staff for the way they have dealt with this matter. I have talked to a lot of staff of the Water Corporation and they have said that going through this process of talking to customers, finding out what their issues are and finding solutions that suit the Water Corporation and the customers has been one of the most productive and worthwhile things that they have done during their career at the Water Corporation.