

VACSWIM — REGIONAL PROGRAMS

Grievance

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Nationals WA) [9.07 am]: My grievance is to the minister representing the Minister for Education. I thank the minister for taking the time to consider the matters that I am raising on behalf of my constituents and the member for Roe. The first issue I would like to raise is the cancellation of the VacSwim country early-start program. The Department of Education has made the decision to cancel this program for 2019–2020. I am advised that this is because the last day of term 4 is 19 December and there will not be enough time between the end of the term and the beginning of the Christmas period to run the program. Although enrolments open in mid-July, most parents would be booking in their kids closer to the closing date in November, when I suspect they will be most disappointed to find the options normally available to them are no longer possible. I am not sure why the school term dates are so late this year, whether this has been an issue in previous years or will be in future years, but it is extremely disappointing this program has been cancelled without consultation. I understand that in the past a number of smaller communities have offered end-of-year lessons in the VacSwim country early-start program in December, including the days between Christmas and New Year, and I ask whether this option was considered before the program was cut. The department has attempted to compensate by offering VacSwim January programs 1 and 2 at additional venues throughout the wheatbelt, and we recognise that this is an effort to try to ameliorate the loss of the early-start program.

This brings me to the second point I would like to raise. At least two communities have contacted me and the Member for Roe to say that VacSwim in their town has been cancelled completely and in at least one community the program has been reduced. In Koorda, a wheatbelt town 230 kilometre from Perth, families have been told they can enrol in programs being offered at towns “relatively nearby such as Mukinbudin, Wongan Hills, Trayning and Dowerin”. From Koorda, a round trip to Mukinbudin is 150 kilometres. It is 175 kilometres to Wongan Hills, 144 kilometres to Trayning and 150 kilometres to Dowerin. This is assuming that one is travelling direct from Koorda town site to Mukinbudin and not from an outlying farm, adding further distance. In Wickepin, 71 families were enrolled in VacSwim last year. This year they will need to travel to Narrogin or another “close” town. The correspondence I have seen from the department includes the remarkable statement that “we acknowledge that there is likely to be less interest in VacSwim in the wheatbelt region during January because many residents traditionally vacate the area in this period”. I find it astonishing that this is being used as an excuse to cut services that have run for many years at exactly the same time. Seventy-one families is a significant number; it is hardly a program catering for just three or four kids. The lessons at Wickepin were utilised by not only those in that community, but also Yealering residents. Wickepin is 40 kilometres from Narrogin and Yealering is 70 kilometres from Narrogin. Again, people from a farm must add the extra distance to the round trip total.

I suspect the next statement from the department is in fact the real reason why some towns have had their program cut or simply cancelled. I quote from my notes for the benefit of Hansard: “In order to keep the program viable then and maximise enrolments, we have reduced the number of venues while trying to cater for the surrounding areas.” We are left to conclude that this government is happy for those families to foot the bill for extra travel, not to mention the fact that they will be travelling out of town every day with flow-on effects like shopping and incidentals being drawn from their local community, simply to save the department a few dollars.

It does not surprise me, but it does disappoint me, that this decision was made with no consultation with either the shire or the community and, frankly, came as a complete surprise—even more so because those small towns bend over backwards to accommodate the department with scheduling and support it with the use of their pools. Wickepin even provides the service free of charge for people attending VacSwim. I am not sure whether other towns have suffered a similar fate—I truly hope not—but I would like the minister to clarify this in his response so we have a clear picture of the state of play going into January. The only other VacSwim program that I am aware of currently is in Merredin, in my electorate, where a reduced program is being offered, meaning it will be a 100 kilometre round trip to Westonia for families who need to enrol in the later program in late January.

This year’s “National Drowning Report” states that people are 2.3 times more likely to drown in regional or remote areas in Australia. Our regions are dotted with creeks, rivers, waterholes, swimming pools and farm dams, and have kilometres of open coastline. In the context of the towns I have highlighted today, there are more drownings every year in inland waterways than on beaches or any other location. I ask the minister and the government to reconsider these cuts and work to reinstate the country early-start program—if not this year, then certainly for next year—and most definitely the January programs that were cut in Koorda and Wickepin and the reduced programs in Merredin, along with any others that may have been cut.

It is the least the government and the minister can consider, having increased the fees for families to access the lessons as announced in the 2017–18 state budget. We should be removing barriers to gaining lifesaving skills for

our regional communities, not creating more. Western Australia has a good record for drownings, but no drowning is acceptable. Comparatively speaking, when we consider the statistics that were released—the Minister for Sport and Recreation talked about them this week in Parliament—we have a great record in Western Australia. However, it will not be maintained if families are unable to access affordable swimming lessons close to their communities. I implore the minister and the government to reconsider these cuts and to provide an explanation of why an entire program has been cut from a program that to my knowledge has run for at least 60 years in Western Australia as part of the learning-to-swim program with in-term lessons and also during the school holidays in the summer break.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Tourism) [9.13 am]: I thank the member for Central Wheatbelt for her grievance. I am representing the Minister for Education and Training. Thanks to the disruption in traffic this morning, I had the interesting experience of hearing the member speak on radio about this grievance only moments ago before I entered Parliament. Obviously I am relying on information that was provided by the Minister for Education and Training. I understand what the Nationals WA are doing by suggesting that everything that happens is because of a cut in funding by the government. I think that is quite misleading in this case. As I understand it, from the information I have been provided, the reason the VacSwim course will not be happening in December is the shorter period between the end of school term and school holidays, which is not adequate to allow courses to be run. That is not a cut, but a rescheduling. However, I have some information from the minister to provide in response to the grievance.

The minister says, and I totally agree, that the safety of our community members in the water is a high priority for the government. The 2019 “National Drowning Report” shows that children aged five to 14 years remain the lowest age group for drowning, including in Western Australia. There are consistently low numbers of drowning deaths of children, which is very encouraging and highlights the importance of comprehensive swimming and water-safety programs. The programs delivered by the Department of Education are a key factor in maintaining low drowning rates in Western Australia. The in-term and VacSwim programs are an important part of this strategy. The VacSwim program, currently in its 100th year, operates annually in the October and December–January school holidays. In 2018–19, VacSwim was delivered at 384 centres to 56 254 students.

We know that there are concerns and challenges for the wheatbelt and farming communities in accessing VacSwim programs. This is due to factors like harvesting and family vacations, which is why the country early-start program was introduced over 20 years ago. The member acknowledged that; that was the reason. VacSwim usually uses all the time available between the end of term 4 and Christmas, and so country early-start programs are usually at least seven days long. This year there are only three working days between the end of school on 19 December and Christmas, so it is simply not possible to run the country early-start programs in that time frame. A meaningful swimming program requires at least five days to develop swimming skills.

When the calendar of VacSwim programs was set in April, it was recognised that the early-start program could not be accommodated in the time available, so as many additional programs as possible were scheduled for January. The approach was to maximise program availability within the restrictions of available venues and swimming instructors, and to try to not reduce the overall provision of programs given the timing of the school calendar this year. Forty-one regional communities usually have a country early-start program. This will not occur in 2019. Thirty of those will have a VacSwim program in January. This is due to the additional 21 programs that are being made available regionally in January. As a result, all available swimming instructors will be deployed during January to run as many programs as possible in as many locations as possible.

The minister acknowledges that 11 communities do not have a VacSwim program available locally this season. The department is working in partnership with each of those communities, including local government, to deliver a workable solution. The solution being worked on is to deliver a five-day VacSwim program during the last week of the school term, starting on 16 December. The department is liaising with local principals and venues to determine the viability of this approach. The 11 locations with no locally available January VacSwim program are the current priority. The list of VacSwim locations for 2019–20 will be finalised after enrolments close in November. The government is committed to ensuring swimming lessons continue to be available for children and young people throughout Western Australia.

As I understand it, the indication is that we are working with the 11 communities that currently do not have scheduled local lessons in the hope that that will be done in the last week of December. I hope that is of value to the member and I hope it gives some promise of a solution to the communities she has asked about.