

CHILDCARE SERVICES — WHEATBELT

Statement

HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural) [5.40 pm]: That was a very interesting speech from Hon Linda Savage. I want to follow on from her comments by talking about the importance of child care, particularly in my electorate. I will touch on some of the issues that she spoke about, including access to high-quality child care in the regions and how important child care is as part of the early years. Last June I raised concerns about the sustainability of some of the childcare services in regional Western Australia, particularly in the Wheatbelt. The Wheatbelt is unique for many reasons and, from the government's perspective, it is quite a challenging part of the state to deliver services to because of the small population centres distributed across the area. Last year I raised concerns that had been triggered by the withdrawal of federal funding for occasional childcare services, but other issues had been bubbling alongside those concerns, including the fact that some services in the Wheatbelt required part-time long-day care licences, rather than long-day care licences. That was due to the population, the demand for the services and the burden of regulation on some of the smaller centres, which is no doubt a challenge across the sector. These issues were all coming to the fore, but it was really triggered by the fact that the commonwealth government removed funding for occasional childcare services.

I am pleased to report that, soon after this cut to the funding, the state government, via the royalties for regions program, stepped in and gave these centres funding for another two years to enable them to make plans to either transition or provide a different type of service. I think the challenge was that not a great deal of notice was given to the centres; the announcement was made and two months later the funding was going to disappear and the services that they provided were not going to exist. Unfortunately, there were no other services in 17 of the 21 towns in which these services were impacted. These towns would have been left without any form of child care. We have stepped in to make sure that these services continue until 2012. This means that they can plan for their future. I spoke last June about the fact that Hon Brendon Grylls and I had for some time been trying to raise this issue at a federal level with the Minister for Employment Participation and Childcare, Hon Kate Ellis. We had offered her several invitations to travel with us through the Wheatbelt to look at this unique part of the world and to meet some of the people who were providing the services in these towns. Unfortunately, we did not have a lot of luck. We were repeatedly told that occasional child care did not meet the national standards that the federal government was trying to introduce through the new regulations and the quality framework and that the quality of the services being offered to the children posed risks and so these services were more likely to fail. They were the reasons given to me at the end of last year.

I am pleased to report that, since we have gone through that process, we have had a federal election, at which Tony Crook was elected as the member for O'Connor. Tony joined with me, Hon Brendon Grylls and our other colleagues in the chorus on this issue. He has been very effective, because in a debate at the end of last year, he invited Hon Kate Ellis to visit the Wheatbelt and she took up his offer. On 4 and 5 April, Tony Crook, Hon Kate Ellis, two of her staff members and I spent two days travelling through the Wheatbelt and met with the providers of the various services in a number of towns. We went to Quairading and visited Little Rainmakers Child Care Centre. It is a long-day care centre that shares space in the Country Women's Association of Australia's old building. The centre offers childcare services on a couple of days and when the CWA members come in on the weekend, the childcare centre has to pack up everything and put it away. However, that is how it works and the town is very grateful for the service that the centre is providing.

We went to Narembeen and visited the Narembeen Numbat Occasional Childcare Centre. We went to Kulin and Katanning over two days, and we invited representatives from surrounding centres. It is testament to the fact that people feel so passionately about this service in their town that representatives from The Boodie Rats—Mukinbudin Occasional Care drove to Narembeen to put their point of view; representatives from Cunderdin came to Quairading; and representatives from Darkan came to Katanning. People travelled a significant distance to put their case to the minister firsthand and they certainly appreciated the opportunity to do so. The people there included committee members, parents, children, staff members and shire representatives—and we had a lot of food. I think there was food in every photograph that was taken. The people there laid on the food Wheatbelt-style and it was absolutely fantastic. However, when I got back home I felt that I did not need to see another cake!

I take a moment to thank Minister Kate Ellis for accepting the invitation. It is a busy time of the year; it is budget time; she was in negotiations with her staff as she was driving around the countryside; and she has other ministerial duties. To her credit she took two days out of her schedule to drive to the electorate with us. We did not fly in, fly out; we actually drove between each town. That also helped her to take in some of the unique aspects of the Wheatbelt, and it was much appreciated.

I want to talk about the message from those representatives that I came away with; that is, the overriding desire to establish services that reflect the needs of the population in the Wheatbelt. It was interesting to hear the minister talk about the issues that were raised, specifically the vital need for part-time, long-day care services and occasional childcare services. A number of issues were raised, but the issues and challenges raised with the minister in that part of the world were unique; they had not been raised by anyone anywhere else in Australia. The two main issues that came through during the two days we travelled around were the movement towards offering only long-day care services without part-time day care exemptions as part of the national quality framework; and the neighbourhood model of occasional care that has fallen out of that because the government does not want to fund those services. I have to say that some permanent exemptions have been given to some communities for long-day care centres so that they can operate part-time. Previously they had to ask the department every six months for the exemption to be continued. That put them under a great deal of stress and strain. Therefore, Cunderdin, Dalwallinu, Darkan, Corrigin and a few others have permanent exemptions. That indicates a willingness to provide some flexibility in the system so that it can work in these Wheatbelt communities. Those centres acknowledge that flexibility is very important to them, as it gives them some level of confidence that they will be there in another six months.

Another issue that was raised was the apparent start-up funding for long-day care centres through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. However, that funding can be accessed only in an “exceptional circumstance”. People who intend to set up a childcare service in a small town must prove that they need sustainability funding and they must meet the exceptional circumstance criterion. We are not sure quite what “exceptional circumstance” means. We have asked for clarification and we are hoping that the minister will come back to us on that.

Questions were asked about other types of funding, such as sustainability funding, which people can apply for if the childcare centre is the only service in town. In Katanning there are two childcare services. When the neighbourhood model ceases to exist, the remaining centre must transition to a long-day care centre or cease to exist. The centres in Katanning are unable to apply for sustainability funding because there are two centres in town. It is a wonderful thing for the town to have two centres, and the parents expressed their delight at having the choice between long-day care and occasional care. The parents we visited in the occasional day care centre said that it suited their needs and they would not go across to long-day care because it was more structured and they did not have as much flexibility. That service is at risk and we look forward to working with the minister.

It was a very worthwhile experience. I hope it will lead to a greater understanding by the federal government of the Wheatbelt, and the fact that perhaps there is a need to look at the region as a unique part of the nation and that a degree of flexibility is needed when these challenges occur; particularly with the introduction of new quality framework regulations. It would be remiss of me not to mention and thank the Wheatbelt Organisation for Children’s Services, which has lobbied very hard on this issue for the past year—in fact, for longer than a year. It was present at all of these meetings and it put its case to the minister very well.