

Division 47: Chemistry Centre (WA), \$8 134 000 —

Ms J.M. Freeman, Chair.

Mr D.J. Kelly, Minister for Science.

Mr P. McCafferty, Chief Executive Officer.

Mr G. Paust, Acting Director, Business and Corporate Services.

Ms L. Chen, Acting Chief Finance Officer.

Ms N. Arrowsmith, Chief of Staff.

Ms A. Anderson, Senior Media Adviser.

Mr L. Clarke, Senior Policy Adviser.

Mr N. Burgess, Senior Policy Adviser, ICT.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available the following day.

It is the intention of the Chair to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point. The estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussion of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item, program or amount in the current division. Members should give these details in preface to their question. If a division or service is the responsibility of more than one minister, a minister shall only be examined in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee rather than asking that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the principal clerk by Friday, 29 September 2017. I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice through the online questions system.

I give the call to the member for Churchlands.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: On page 693 of the *Budget Statements*, there is a table under "Outcomes, Services and Key Performance Information". In that table, under "Government Goals", it refers to "Strong Communities: Safe communities and supported families". I refer to the desired outcomes column that refers to "Quality scientific advice". I am also referring to the expense table below that outlines "Commercial and Scientific Information and Advice", which is the actual money appropriated. Does the expense summary include the work being undertaken by the Chemistry Centre on the levels of lead in the water at Perth Children's Hospital?

Mr D.J. KELLY: The ChemCentre is doing work on Perth Children's Hospital on a fee-for-service basis. The payments received for that would be included in the budget.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: The amount for 2016–17 is budgeted at \$21.742 million and the estimated actual is budgeted at \$21.892 million. Is the minister saying that that includes money spent by the ChemCentre on testing for the levels of lead in the water at Perth Children's Hospital?

Mr D.J. KELLY: Yes; that is money earned because of that testing regime. That is right.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Linked to the spending on Perth Children's Hospital, and given that during another hearing a question was put to one of the minister's advisers whether it was prudent to also consider auditing alternative sites of high risk, such as hospitals and schools where kids go, Mr McCafferty said —

I believe so, and I think schools, as you have mentioned, are one of potential risk.

I ask: is there any ChemCentre spending on testing for lead in other government buildings that children may use or reside in?

Mr D.J. KELLY: After the issues with Perth Children's Hospital became apparent, testing was done at a range of other government buildings by the ChemCentre. Other buildings were tested and that money would be included in that budget line item that the member mentioned.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Can the minister outline to this estimates hearing what institutions he has concerns about? What is the nature of those concerns?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I do not have any concerns about other institutions. I am aware that the ChemCentre has tested for a range of government and private agencies on a fee-for-service basis, and, as the Minister for Science, I do

not, generally speaking, involve myself in those commercial arrangements—for example, the testing that was done for Perth Children's Hospital. Obviously, I am aware that the ChemCentre is doing it, but it provides those test results directly to the task force that is in charge of Perth Children's Hospital. It does not provide those reports to me as a matter of course. The ChemCentre does a range of testing—that is, for Racing and Wagering Western Australia, police and a whole bunch of people and private organisations. As the minister, I am not across, nor I do not get advised of, those test results.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: In the Public Accounts Committee hearing when Mr McCafferty was asked whether schools in particular, amongst other things, should be tested, he said —

I believe so, and I think schools, as you have mentioned, are one of potential risk.

Clearly, Mr McCafferty is indicating that the ChemCentre should be involved in testing schools. Can the minister outline to the committee how many schools have been tested and which ones?

Mr D.J. KELLY: At this point in time, the Department of Education or the relevant minister has not requested the ChemCentre undertake any testing of schools.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The minister did in the media. She said that she was going to make contact.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Sorry?

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Is the minister still finishing the answer to my question?

Mr D.J. KELLY: If you guys start to work together rather than interjecting on each other, that would be good.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: In the interest of public safety, I am more interested in the minister's answer.

Mr D.J. KELLY: The question was: has any testing been done on schools? All I can say to the member is that the ChemCentre has not been requested to do any testing of schools. I am aware that subsequent to the hearing that the member referred to, the education department has supplied some additional information to Mr McCafferty about that issue. His evidence is on the record, but certainly my understanding is that one of his concerns was that there may be some issues during the period over the long summer holiday when water could potentially remain stagnant in the pipe. I understand that the Department of Education has provided some additional information to Mr McCafferty; that is, schools are not boarded up over the summer break and a range of activities go on in schools. Gardeners water lawns and gardens, so the water is turned on and off obviously for that function, and cleaners—I know this from personal experience—conduct a vacation clean prior to the children returning to school. Obviously, a vacation clean requires the cleaners to turn taps on and off to access the water system. Those activities, as well as teachers coming back to prepare for the new school year, mean that prior to students coming back, there is a shortened period during which water may remain dormant in the pipes. That information has been passed on to Mr McCafferty. I understand from him that that has largely addressed his concerns, but, ultimately, whether any testing will be done in schools will be a decision for the relevant minister.

[11.40 am]

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Following on from that, under questioning on 6 September, Mr McCafferty was asked whether he would make those recommendations that all schools get checked and Mr McCafferty answered, "We have not, but we certainly will." I suppose my question is: have you?

Mr D.J. KELLY: Have I? Sorry; I do not quite understand the question.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: I will say it again. The question put to Mr McCafferty was whether he would make those recommendations that all schools get checked. On 6 September, Mr McCafferty answered, "We have not, but we certainly will". Has he made the recommendation that all schools get checked?

Mr D.J. KELLY: My understanding is that subsequent to that evidence, Mr McCafferty met with officials from the education department and discussed his concerns. As I indicated, at that meeting the education department provided Mr McCafferty with additional information about the length of time water may remain dormant in the pipes, and I think that was informative for Mr McCafferty. It is not the case that pipes remain shut off for the whole period of the summer break. In response to that evidence, Mr McCafferty's concerns have been raised directly with the education department and there has been an exchange of information. My understanding is that that information has largely addressed Mr McCafferty's concerns, but, ultimately, whether testing will be done will be determined by a risk assessment by the education department and will be a decision for the minister. I understand that Mr McCafferty is comfortable that that risk assessment will be undertaken.

The CHAIR: This questioning has gone on for longer than 10 minutes. Do members want to continue?

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Given that Mr McCafferty is here, it would be good to hear from him about whether he is satisfied that his recommendation that the schools get checked has been followed up. Can we get a response from Mr McCafferty through the minister?

Mr D.J. KELLY: The member will know that in this process, he can ask questions of the minister.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: That is what I have just done.

Mr D.J. KELLY: It is up to the minister to make a decision on whether or not —

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: I asked through the minister.

The CHAIR: The issue is that questions should be directed to the minister through the Chair. Members cannot ask a direct question of an adviser, so it is for the minister to refer.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: I have asked the minister, given that Mr McCafferty is here —

The CHAIR: That is not a question, member; that is a request of the minister. I am not ruling that as a question in terms of this. Do you want to move on?

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: No. Finally, on this issue, if we are not going to hear from Mr McCafferty, which is a shame because it is about public safety, what appropriation amounts have been allocated to the testing of schools given the recommendation made by Mr McCafferty that schools certainly will be tested?

Mr D.J. KELLY: We take the issue of public safety extremely seriously. I remind the member that the only public building in which lead has been found is a building built by the previous government—that is, Perth Children's Hospital. I do not think the member should come in here —

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: No children are occupying that hospital; it is a building site at the moment. We know that children are occupying schools right now.

Mr D.J. KELLY: We are painfully aware that no children are occupying the children's hospital at this time. We are paying \$500 000 a month for the car park that the previous government privatised.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Let us get back to the safety of children; that is what we are interested in.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I reiterate: we take public safety very seriously. The only public building in which lead has been detected at levels that are dangerous to public health is Perth Children's Hospital. Asbestos was also found in that building, so I think the member should look in the mirror on the issue of public safety.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: I have a supplementary question.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I am answering the question.

The CHAIR: The minister has not finished.

Mr D.J. KELLY: The member asked whether any appropriation has been made for testing in schools. My understanding is that a decision has not been made about that. It would be made by the Minister for Education and Training, because she is the minister responsible for schools. I can absolutely guarantee the member—I do not think I am speaking off the record—that if a risk assessment was undertaken and it found that there was a requirement or a necessity in the interests of public safety for that testing to be done, this government would find the money to do it.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I have a further question on this issue. With regard to what the minister said about Mr McCafferty meeting with the education department and the education department providing information, can he elaborate on the information that has been discussed with Mr McCafferty, given the concerns that were raised at the public hearing of the Public Accounts Committee? Have Mr McCafferty's concerns been allayed with the provision of that information or have they been heightened? Can he answer that?

Mr D.J. KELLY: My understanding from the evidence that Mr McCafferty gave at the other hearing is that the concern he raised was not about water in schools generally, but about water in schools after the long summer holiday. The concern was that if water remained stagnant in pipes for an extended period, there may be some water quality issues with that water at first flush, if you like, at the beginning of each school year. The education department gave Mr McCafferty some more information about the activities.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Can the minister elaborate on that information?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I am more than happy to. The perception of some people is that schools are closed for seven or nine weeks, when in fact that is not the case. A range of activities go on in schools over that period and that shortens the time that water remains dormant in the pipes. For example, gardeners have to keep the lawns and the gardens in good shape over summer so that when kids come back, the school is green. Obviously, that requires a substantial amount of watering. At the end of the long summer break, cleaners attend schools and do what is called a vacation school clean. Immediately prior to students coming back to school, the cleaners are in schools cleaning. Obviously, that requires them to access water. Those two activities alone—the activities of the gardeners and the cleaners—mean that water does not remain stagnant in pipes for as long as people might think.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Can the minister give a 100 per cent guarantee that there are not elevated levels in schools during this period? That is the question we are asking. Why is testing not being done to allay any potential fears? I do not think there are any fears, but when an expert has raised that concern in a committee hearing, it is the government's responsibility to allay those fears by doing the testing as per the experts who raised the concern at a public hearing.

[11.50 am]

Mr D.J. KELLY: I appreciate the point that the member made. An issue was raised at that hearing. That issue has been followed up with the education department. In addition to the issues that I have raised about the activities in schools over summer, the education department is currently considering other information. One is the fact that there is no evidence in the community of elevated lead levels —

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Because there has been no testing.

Mr D.J. KELLY: No. I understand that testing for lead has been carried out—I am the Minister for Science, not the Minister for Health—in the community amongst children. Whether that is part of a program or spasmodically, I am not sure. There is no evidence out there in the community that there are elevated levels of lead amongst children; in fact, I understand that they are going down.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Are you available to provide as a supplementary —

The CHAIR: Member, you have been on this question for 17 minutes and 37 seconds.

Mr D.J. KELLY: It is very important.

The CHAIR: It is an important issue but can I facilitate this to come to some sort of closure?

Mr D.J. KELLY: For example, if there was evidence in the community of elevated lead levels amongst children, we would try to trace that back to where it was coming from. We might say that maybe it is in schools. I understand that there is no evidence of elevated lead levels amongst children. That is another thing that the education department will weigh up in making a decision on whether there is a need to do testing. The education department has offered Mr McCafferty a variety of information to address the specific issue of water allegedly being stagnant in schools over summer. The other information that it will consider is the prevalence of lead amongst children in the community. Ultimately, the minister and the education department will make that call.

The CHAIR: Member for North West Central, you have another question but we have 10 minutes left for the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation. Did you want to move on?

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: I want to clarify one point. Further to this, there is a budget allocation of \$21.892 million for 2016–17 for commercial and scientific information and advice. The minister mentioned earlier that part of that amount of money was used on the lead testing of the new Perth Children's Hospital. I take it that that is in the department's budget. I also heard him say that it is up to the education department to do things. I need some clarification. We have the chief executive officer of ChemCentre recommending that all schools get checked and saying that he is going to make a recommendation that they do. Just to clarify this, is the minister saying that it is up to the Minister for Education and Training to allocate money in her budget for this testing and not up to the minister as Minister for Science? Is the minister saying that even though the chief executive officer wants to do the testing, it is not up to him to allocate it in the budget?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I give the example of the children's hospital. The agency responsible for that project—I understand that was Finance at the time—made a decision to engage ChemCentre to do testing around water before it took practical completion of that project. It was a decision of Finance at the time. ChemCentre did not say that because a new children's hospital is being built, it wants to test the water. When Finance made a decision that it wanted to do some testing, it engaged ChemCentre on a commercial arrangement to do the testing. The same would apply with the schools. It is not up to ChemCentre to say that it wants to test schools; it would have to be a decision of the agency that owns those buildings, which in this case is the education department, to do that testing.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Just to follow up, given that the minister's CEO is recommending the testing, has the minister recommended to cabinet that testing occur in schools as per his CEO's recommendation?

Mr D.J. KELLY: The evidence that was given the other day resulted in direct discussions with the education department to see if there was a real issue here.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Why will the minister not let the CEO know?

Mr D.J. KELLY: Part of the concern that Mr McCafferty raised —

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Obviously the minister was concerned about him answering any questions.

Mr D.J. KELLY: The heckling that we occasionally get from the member for North West Central was around the perception of a long period of stagnation amongst the schools. As a result of that evidence, there has been an

exchange of information. It will now be up to the Minister for Education and Training to make a decision on that testing. I can assure the member—I am not talking out of turn—that if it is determined that there is a public health need to do that testing, the money will be found.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Is the minister able to provide supplementary information on how the CEO's recommendation is progressing?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I think I have provided the member with the up-to-date information. Mr McCafferty has met directly with the education department. It is now a decision for the department to make about whether any further action is required. I cannot provide any other information.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Is there no supplementary information or information that the minister could provide on notice with respect to which schools have been asked to do testing?

Mr D.J. KELLY: No; I cannot give the member any other information. It is a question best asked of the Minister for Education and Training.

The CHAIR: That comes to the end of division 47.

The appropriation was recommended.