

Chairman; Ms Lisa Baker; Mr John Day; Mr Frank Alban; Ms Janine Freeman; Mr Andrew Waddell; Mr Albert Jacob

Division 60: Communities, \$99 794 000 —

Ms A.R. Mitchell, Chairman.

Mr J.H.D. Day, Minister for Planning representing the Minister for Community Services.

Ms J. Perkins, Director General.

Ms H.M. Creed, Executive Director, Children and Family Services.

Ms S. Withers, Executive Director, Redress WA.

Ms D. Clements, Acting Executive Director, Community Engagement.

Mr P. Walton, Executive Director, Corporate and Business Support.

Ms K. Lunt, Acting Director, Seniors, Carers and Volunteering.

Mr S. Reid, Acting Executive Director, Policy and Planning.

Mr C. Johnson, Director, Financial Services.

The CHAIRMAN: I ask the minister to introduce his advisers.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: The member for Maylands.

Ms L.L. BAKER: The second dot point on page 731 of the budget papers refers to the importance of early childhood experiences in lifelong outcomes. As far as I am aware, the government is not setting up a central agency in Western Australia to coordinate the provision of early years development, education, care, health and social support services et cetera for children. I know that the Department for Communities sits on the Premier's project team on monitoring outcomes of the early years. What is the government monitoring and measuring?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: I agree with the implication of the member's question that this is a very important area of public policy and the provision of services. The early years are crucial in the development of children and to the course of their future life. It is a very important area. There may not be a central agency as such, as the member referred to, but certainly there is a substantial effort across government and across a number of departments, including the Department for Communities, to provide services and, in particular, to target those services where there is the greatest need. I ask Ms Creed to provide further information in response to the question.

Ms H.M. Creed: I have been representing the Department for Communities on an early years collaborative group that was established by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. It includes a number of government and non-government agencies, and it is in the process of finalising a report. In response to the question about monitoring outcomes, part of the work of that group has been to look at developing an outcomes framework but, as I indicated, that work has not yet been finalised.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: Can we provide information about the agencies that are involved in this area?

Ms H.M. Creed: Certainly. The government agencies that are represented on the group include the Department for Communities, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, the Department of Treasury and Finance and the Department for Child Protection. The non-government agencies include Ngala, the YMCA, the Smith Family, Child Inclusive Learning and Development Australia, Playgroups WA and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. I am not sure whether I have missed anybody, but there is a range of non-government agencies.

Ms L.L. BAKER: In relation to the work of the Economic Audit Committee group, we have just heard a list of incredibly well resourced and credible organisations that have a wealth of experience, such as the Telethon Institute. I do not know why, after three years, the government would still not have got this together. What more research does the government possibly need to do in this area?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: I am not sure whether it is a matter of needing more research, although it is always valuable. Evaluation needs to happen continually to some extent. It is more a matter of providing services. As I understand it, there has been an increased effort in that respect. I agree to some extent that it would be desirable for one agency perhaps to adopt a higher profile in providing early childhood services, but the important thing is that the services are being provided. I will ask the director general to comment further on that.

Ms J. Perkins: I am happy to comment. The work that has been done through the group that Helen Creed outlined has been supplemented by some collaborative work that the Department for Communities is doing on the ground at a local level with the Department of Education and the Department of Health. We are working on a number of initiatives that bring together local approaches to provide a much more integrated approach. That work is supplemented and is being worked on.

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Mr F.A. ALBAN: The second dot point on page 732 refers to the increasing proportion of aged people in the population and the challenge facing seniors. What is the government doing to provide for the needs of seniors?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: The number of seniors in our community is increasing in both quantity and proportion of the population. The government considers this to be an important sector of the community. We recognise that there are some cost-of-living pressures which apply to everyone of course, but which perhaps impact to a greater extent on people with lower incomes and who are either in receipt of the age pension or self-funded retirees. In recognition of those cost pressures, a decision was made in this budget to increase the cost-of-living rebate to \$150 per individual or \$225 per couple. The amount of funding that has been provided to this sector since 2009 totals about \$42 million. That is a substantial amount of funding that has been provided. In addition, there is the safety and security rebate that the government has introduced. That program allows Seniors Card holders to claim up to \$200 per household to buy and/or install security fittings. During 2010, a further \$200 per household was provided to include electrical and fire safety items in the scheme. Seniors Card holders can now access a total of \$400 from that scheme. There is a time limit on this scheme; it expires in June 2012. People who want to access it obviously should do so before then. There is also the important policy on public transport whereby seniors can avail themselves of free travel between 9.00 am and 3.30 pm on weekdays and all day on weekends and public holidays and throughout Seniors Week. That is a significant benefit to seniors in the community. The Seniors Card provides quite substantial benefits other than accessing discounts. Probably more significantly, Seniors Card holders can receive a rebate on or a reduction in some fees and charges, including local government rates. People who work 25 hours or less a week can now access the card, compared with the previous eligibility requirement of 20 hours or less a week. That is also quite a significant increase. About 5 000 cardholders across the state will benefit from that increase in eligibility. It is also interesting to note that British expatriates living in Western Australia on a section 410 visa will now also qualify for this scheme, so that is of a significant benefit to them.

[4.30 pm]

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I refer to the fifth dot point on page 732, which refers to the Redress WA scheme. It says that Redress provides recognition of and support to those who were abused as children in the care of the state and that it will be finalised with all payments being made to eligible applicants. Can the minister tell me when the final payments—not assessments—will be made to applicants? When will all those payments be made? How many payments have been completed to date? How many outstanding payments are there?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: In respect of when the payments will be made, that is in part dependent on the claimants providing the full details that are required to make the payments, but full assessments will be completed by 30 June; the Premier gave that commitment. That of course applies to everybody who can be located out of the approximately 600 remaining to be assessed. With regard to when they will be paid, it will be soon after that time, but I will ask Ms Withers to provide further information.

Ms S. Withers: At the moment we have resolved 3 875 applications. We have 5 918 applications, so the gap is what we are currently processing.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Have the 3 875 applications that have been resolved all been paid?

Ms S. Withers: No, they are resolved. There are a further 64 who received eligibility payments because they were unfortunately deceased before we could process them. The figure of 3 875 includes a small proportion of about 64 that we have been unable to fully complete. We started with about 4 000 applications that were defective in some way and we are down to about 64. I thought that was a reasonable effort. Included in the figure of 3 875 are 495 who will receive no payment, the vast majority of whom are ineligible.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: As I understand it, the minister gave an undertaking that the final payments would be made by 30 June. Is there paperwork that is waiting to be completed? Of the 5 918 applications, 3 875 have been resolved; therefore, the assessments have been completed. Is the department waiting on paperwork, or is it that the paperwork just needs to be processed?

Ms S. Withers: It is a combination. We have received all the paperwork we need. However, there is a group of about 672 applicants who have not yet received a call from a senior Redress social worker. This is the group that will be assessed by 30 June. Of that group of 672, 462 have current addresses and phone numbers with us. Unfortunately, we are still chasing those details for 210 of them. They have all completed applications and are processable, but it is part of our process that everyone gets a phone call, and unless we have a current phone number, we cannot ring them. We have recently phoned and written to them all, and we are about to write to them again to warn them that unless they contact us within 28 days, we will process their application without a social worker call. We can do that, but we would prefer not to.

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We are also waiting on paperwork from another group of about 270, to tell us that they have accepted our offer and to give us their bank account details. There is a group waiting to go to the panel because they have been assessed as upper-level cases. There is a group waiting to be processed by the lawyers, and there is a group waiting to be processed by the social worker team leaders; we actually have a production line. I do not wish that to sound disrespectful, but we need to get people's cases processed, so we actually have to run in a relatively mechanistic way to get it done; it does not mean that we are not respectful to our applicants, because I believe we are.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I realise that this is a very difficult client group and that they are very complex and fragile. I know that the department will have received complaints; we have been told about some of them. I am well aware that the department has received complaints about applicants not having phone calls or messages returned, or applicants being told to expect a formal offer of payment within four weeks and then being told four weeks later they should not have been given that advice. Those are just some of the examples that we have been told about. Does the department have a record of complaints, and can the minister let us know how many complaints have been received? A lot of people have been processed; I appreciate that, but I would like to know how many complaints have been recorded.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: I am not sure whether there is a record of that; I will ask Ms Withers to comment.

Ms S. Withers: We have a range of different categories of complaints. There have been about 60 appeals against offers, which is about one per cent of the total applicants. People can escalate their complaint if they are not happy with what we have done, and a total of three complaints have been escalated to the Department for Communities. People can also escalate their complaints to the Ombudsman; I think there is a total of five of those. That is an indication that people are fairly happy with how we deal with their complaints.

In respect of complaints about the help desk, I am sometimes a little mystified. As the member said, our applicant group requires very considerate, careful, gentle and respectful handling, and we try to do that, although it is often very hard. We consistently take 500 calls a week at the help desk. One of our key performance indicators is that if a message is left, it should be returned the next day. We do our very best to nurture and support our applicants because we are aware that they are very distressed. I am often concerned when I hear that. Some applicants are waiting for their applications to go before the panel; we do not always want to let them know that, because it means that they are possibly going to get a level 3 or 4, but if they do not, we will have very much upset them by raising their expectations. Sometimes it is wiser to say nothing than to give people information that could be misinterpreted.

Ms L.L. BAKER: In respect of the KPIs, outcomes and KPIs are listed on page 732, and there is a section dealing with complaints. Are Redress clients caught up in that as well? Are they part of the department's assessment or customer report about how needs are being met? I think there is a category about how customers' needs are being met. I am not saying that very clearly. Are the Redress clients part of that KPI?

[4.40 pm]

Ms S. Withers: I assume that if all three are escalated to the department, they are in that group.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I understand.

Mr A.J. WADDELL: My question goes back to the numbers that were bandied about—3 875, 5 918, 672 and 210. A lot of numbers were thrown out there. It seems to me that at 1 June there is a significant gap between the 3 875 who have received a payment and the 5 918 who have applied for a payment. Given how long this process has been going on, what is the possibility that the minister will meet this government's commitment that everyone will receive their payment by June 30 this year?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: A commitment was not given to pay everyone by 30 June. The commitment that was given was that everyone's application would be assessed and a decision would be made by 30 June.

Mr A.J. WADDELL: Will all of them be assessed by then?

Ms S. Withers: They will have had their first assessment and level established. We will meet that deadline.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Of the 2 043 outstanding applications, 672 had not received a call from a senior social worker; 462 did not have a current address; 210 addresses are being chased; 207 needed the paperwork to be returned; and some applications are before panels, lawyers and senior social workers. How many applications are before a panel, a lawyer and social worker respectively? Will I get 2 043 if I add those figures together?

Ms S. Withers: I hope so; otherwise we have lost some applicants.

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Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Maybe by way of supplementary information, the minister could provide a breakdown of the 2 043 outstanding applications and the other 595 that were included. I would like it to be made very clear where those applicants are at in the process. If we know that the Department for Communities is chasing up 210 addresses, we can ask the people who ring our electorate offices whether the department has their correct address. An applicant from Sydney was told that he was not eligible for a Redress payment because he was no longer living in Western Australia. It is important to be clear about those sorts of things.

Ms S. Withers: I can certainly provide the member with that information as at today. I reiterate that 672 applicants are waiting for a call from a senior Redress officer. Those 672 are broken down into the 462 who did not have a current address and the 210 whose addresses are being chased. I can supply the member with the number of people who are waiting to be assessed by a team leader, the number who are waiting to be assessed by a lawyer, the number who are waiting to go before a panel and the number of people whose paperwork we are waiting for. As I said, that is the stream. We have hundreds of applicants who do not live in the state. We have applicants from all around the world. We certainly have eastern states' applicants and we certainly are paying them. An applicant must have been in care in Western Australia but they do not have to live in Western Australia to be eligible for a payment. The person from Sydney whom the member referred to has been misinformed and needs to ring our help desk to find out whether he is a valid applicant. If he is eligible, his application will be processed.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I have a further question —

The CHAIRMAN: Sorry, we need to —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: No, this is a very important question. In terms of —

The CHAIRMAN: Member for Nollamara! We need to clarify the supplementary information that is to be provided.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Sorry, Chair.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: We will provide a breakdown of the figures regarding the stage of the applications as of today.

[Supplementary Information No B52.]

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Can the minister tell me whether the helpline rings into the Department for Communities or a non-government organisation? At 30 June, will the non-government organisation number be the only number that is available for the Redress applicants?

Ms S. Withers: No, the help desk is staffed by six employees who were recruited and trained by the Department for Communities. The help desk uses a Telstra help-desk system. We will operate the help desk for as long as it is needed. I have budgeted for it to run for several months into the next financial year, possibly until October or November. We can scale down the number of employees from six if required. It always has been a Department for Communities' help desk. It has never been outsourced and will continue to run for as long as we need it.

Mr A.J. WADDELL: I disagree with the minister about whether the government made a commitment to make the payments by 30 June. Can the minister tell us when the government is committing to finalise all the payments by?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: My answer would be as soon as possible after 30 June, but I will ask Ms Withers to provide more precise information if she can.

Ms S. Withers: As I said, it is dependent on the applicants returning their documents to us. The ability of our applicants to deal with the bureaucracy, because of their care history, is not as great as some other members of the community, which is why we offer them so much support. I have planned to finish making the payments sometime in September or October. The panel will finish at the end of August and offers will go out in September and hopefully be returned in October. I am obviously dependent on other people to get their documents back to us, but that is what I have budgeted and planned for.

Mr A.J. WADDELL: I refer to page 731. I am trying to find the section on Carers WA. Is there any additional money in the budget for Carers WA?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: I am informed that there is not, but it does receive some funding, and that will continue.

Mr A.J. WADDELL: Does this budget contain any of the initiatives that were requested in the Carers WA pre-budget submission?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: I am not familiar with what was in its submission.

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Ms J. Perkins: I do not have in front of me the submission of Carers WA requests, but we will continue our work with Carers WA through the Carers Advisory Council on a range of initiatives that are already in train. There are no additional initiatives at this stage in the budget.

Mr A.J. WADDELL: So it will not get anything extra.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: Having gone through the budget process, I know that every minister made requests for funds, some of which were successful and others not. I do not think any minister would be an exception to that. In my own portfolio that was the case. Significant increases in allocations have been made in some areas of government. One of the major decisions that the government announced in the budget was the allocation of an additional \$604 million over five years for non-government organisations. That is a substantial increase. Carers WA is one of the organisations that will benefit from that \$604 million. To that extent, there has been a substantial increase in its funding. I am informed it is a 15 per cent increase from July this year and a further increase next year. The earlier answer I gave was simplistic, I guess, or ignored the fact that there has been a substantial increase in allocations for non-government organisations, of which Carers WA is one.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I refer to the fourth dot point on page 732 under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”. Can the minister explain what strategies are being undertaken to increase the involvement and recognition of women as decision makers or leaders?

[4.50 pm]

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: Especially in the Liberal Party!

Mr J.H.D. DAY: There are some very capable women in the Liberal Party.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: We just need more of them.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: For instance, there is the member for Kingsley.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you, minister.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: The Liberal Party has always taken the approach of promoting and appointing people on the basis of merit. It is wonderful that some very significant leaders have been women.

On the specific question, we are certainly very keen to further progress the position of women in leadership roles throughout the public, private and not-for-profit sectors in Western Australia. Progress has been slower than desirable over the past decade. In 2003, women represented 28 per cent of government boards and committee membership; in 2007, this figure was 32 per cent; and in 2010, it was 37 per cent. That is the highest it has ever been, so there has been a progressive increase, including, obviously, in the time of this government. Efforts are being made across state government agencies to further increase this proportion. The government has worked to address issues surrounding women in leadership and to understand and overcome the barriers to women occupying senior management and executive leadership roles. The Minister for Women’s Interests has endorsed a recommendation from the Women’s Advisory Council that women and leadership be identified as a priority area for development within the women’s interests portfolio. The Department for Communities has also commissioned a report on women in leadership to identify the barriers to women achieving senior positions and to assist organisations in assessing their own gender equity and by providing strategies to implement change. That report titled “Women in Leadership: Strategies for Change” was prepared by the Maureen Bickley Centre for Women in Leadership at Curtin University of Technology. In terms of the agencies for which I have responsibility, the two senior officers of the Department of Culture and the Arts are both very capable women. There are a number of other women in the other agencies I deal with on a regular basis. That is certainly a good thing, and may it increase.

Ms L.L. BAKER: What is the number of FTEs in the Office for Women’s Policy?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: While we are getting that information I should also add —

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: While they are getting that information can I ask a further question?

The CHAIRMAN: No, the question has been asked; it has not been withdrawn.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Perhaps the minister could tell me later.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: We are happy to provide that by way of supplementary information.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I am seeking the current number of FTEs in the Office for Women’s Policy.

[*Supplementary Information No B53.*]

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Ms J.M. FREEMAN: The women's information service, or the women's info line, is a volunteer-based telephone service. Has a computer database been established to ensure the tracking of information taken from women who contact the service, so that statistics on issues facing women in the community are available to the department?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: Before we answer that question I should also have pointed out in relation to women in the public sector that I recently had a change in my chief of staff, and that position is now held by a woman. I am sure members on the opposite side will be pleased about that.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: We will only be pleased when a woman replaces you as minister!

Mr J.H.D. DAY: That may well happen in future years.

The CHAIRMAN: Quiet please, members.

Ms D. Clements: The women's information service receives calls and emails from women seeking information in a range of areas. Statistics are collected in a spreadsheet-type arrangement. We hope in the future to go to a more sophisticated database.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to the report that the Women's Advisory Council gave to Minister McSweeney in June 2010 on a range of its policy areas. Could the minister please let us know what Minister McSweeney has done in implementing those recommendations or at least in spreading the good word about the recommendations to other ministers? They apply across portfolios.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: I can certainly assure the committee that the minister regularly argues the case for promoting women and, in particular, ensuring their appointment to boards that go through cabinet and so on. Comments are often made. In relation to the particular recommendations of the Women's Advisory Council, I am informed that they have been forwarded to the minister's relevant state and parliamentary colleagues, as most of the areas are outside the jurisdiction of the Minister for Women's Interests. Following the symposium, the Department for Communities is progressing a number of initiatives on leadership, including the development of a women's strategy and plan, which will be with the minister for consideration later this month; research into the impediments to women gaining leadership positions, which I referred to in a previous answer; and the review and update of the "Women's Report Card" to ensure that its purpose and relevance is clear and to enhance the impact of its publication. Three report cards have been published—in 2004, 2006 and 2009—to measure the progress of women in Western Australia in specific areas. The next report card is planned to be released in 2012. There is clearly action in this area.

Ms L.L. BAKER: It sounds like a lot more consultation really.

Ms J.M. FREEMAN: I refer to the final dot point on page 731 of the *Budget Statements* on helping to ensure that young people are healthy, safe and connected with their communities. What is the number of FTEs in the youth portfolio? In particular, how many FTEs are involved in running the cadets? Do any FTEs work with culturally and linguistically diverse youth?

Ms J. Perkins: I will wait for information on the exact number of FTEs. We do not have a specific officer who is dedicated to focussing on issues around CALD. That is an issue that is being considered.

[5.00 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: The minister may want to answer the question by way of supplementary information, because I have to put the question in a minute.

Ms J. Perkins: We are happy for that to be provided.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the minister clear on the information he will provide?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: Yes.

[*Supplementary Information No B54.*]

The appropriation was recommended.