

**DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES — THE PEOPLE PLACE, BUSSELTON**

*Grievance*

**MS L. METTAM (Vasse)** [9.33 am]: My grievance to the Minister for Community Services is about the McGowan government's decision to cut funding to the People Place as of 30 June 2020. My issue has been raised in Parliament by both me and my parliamentary colleagues, so I will not go over the details, but I would like to touch on some of the key points. Last year, the Department of Communities informed the neighbourhood family centres across Western Australia that they had five weeks to apply for the new Empowering Communities program. The People Place, which has successfully operated in the Busselton community for more than 25 years, submitted an application to this ECP tender. Just days before Christmas, the McGowan government informed the People Place that it was unsuccessful in the ECP tender. Then, just a few hours later, it was provided with advice that the contract would be extended until 30 June 2020. Although the 18-month extension of funding was welcome, the way this process has been handled reeks of incompetence and it is nothing short of a disgrace that the People Place was put under this uncertainty just days before Christmas.

In response to a letter that I wrote to the minister, she stated that the needs of the wider Busselton and Dunsborough communities would be met through other centres in the south west including two in Bunbury, and one each in Manjimup and Northcliffe. I would like to emphasise more broadly today the needs of the Busselton region and regional WA. Many people do not realise that the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics' data shows that the population of the City of Bunbury is 31 000, while the City of Busselton's population is over 38 000. Bunbury has many family centres whilst the Busselton, Dunsborough and Yallingup communities have only one—the People Place. Radiance is one example of an essential support group provided by the People Place for mums suffering from postnatal depression. It is unrealistic for these new mums who are suffering from anxiety to travel to Bunbury for at least 30 minutes with an infant in tow. It would also be a great loss for current and future families touched by perinatal anxiety and depression to not have access to this local support network. The People Place currently supports over 3 000 people of all ages, and 40 regular user groups. This will continue to grow in conjunction with community growth and demand. It would be devastating to lose this centre.

I have started an online petition calling on the state government to fund the People Place beyond 2020. This petition currently has almost 700 signatures, which demonstrates the strong community support behind the People Place that has been operating for 25 years and the importance of the programs and services it provides. I have also received numerous letters of support from a wide range of community organisations who use the People Place, including the South West Autism Network, NovaCare and the Naturaliste University of the Third Age, which is deeply concerned by its potential closure. The Naturaliste University of the Third Age, which has 280 members ranging from 55 to 90 years of age, is committed to life-long learning, and to helping senior citizens avoid loneliness and isolation. It uses the People Place to host courses and talks. This is what the university had to say —

On numerous occasions I have heard members express how they don't know what they would do without U3A. Many who are newly retired to Busselton, and those who have had partners pass away, have expressed how much they value the support they receive from groups they have found friendships in.

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It seems to me that the Funding Panel has been very short sighted in their decision regarding funding and needs to get out into grass roots groups in the Community, find out what is really happening and see how their decision is like dropping a stone in a pond, the ripples spread—in this case undermining Community spirit, putting at risk employment of staff and in many ways wiping out the hundreds of hours of voluntary Community service Board Members and user groups have put into The People Place over many years, working for the good of residents of the City of Busselton.

I have been encouraged by some of the minister's most recent comments in a letter to me dated 6 February 2019, in which she stated —

I am confident Communities and The People Place will work together constructively to ensure the outcomes of the Empowering Communities Program are delivered in Busselton beyond 30 June 2020.

I was also pleased to hear her comments in this house last week that she would leave no community unrepresented and, in a response provided in the upper house, that the People Place deed of licence for the centre will be extended to 2024. I ask the minister to guarantee funding for the People Place post-2020 through the Empowering Communities program because its service model aligns with the requirements of the program, and to please not abandon the Busselton community.

**MS S.F. MCGURK (Fremantle — Minister for Community Services)** [9.39 am]: I am pleased to respond to this grievance. As the member for Vasse said, I have previously made statements in this place about the People Place and the Empowering Communities program for a number of reasons, and I will just go through those now. I understand that any organisation that has its funding up for tender will have concerns, especially if it is not

successful in getting its tender recognised under the process. We understood that when we came to government, and first of all in relation to the accommodation support that had been given by the previous state government to organisations like the People Place. It was actually the previous Liberal–National government that cut the accommodation support. I was pleased to make the decision and find the resources from within the Department of Communities to reinstate that accommodation support. That situation had created a lot of uncertainty amongst those organisations. It was also the previous Liberal–National government that decided to commence the tender process.

The People Place was not successful in meeting the tender criteria. As a result, we have this grievance before us today about the uncertainty that faces that organisation. As a government, we did not stop that tender process, because we felt it was important that organisations that receive taxpayer funds meet the tender criteria and be required to express what they do—they need to go through a process of essentially accounting for the public moneys they receive. What we did do was extend the consultation process to make sure that the organisations had ample opportunity to put up the criteria by which the tenders would be assessed. At the beginning of the member’s grievance, she said that the People Place had five weeks to apply for the tender. Technically that is correct, but prior to that process, there was quite a lot of consultation throughout the state with Peter Kenyon—the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. was contracted to go out and work with organisations. I had a lot of good feedback from neighbourhood centres and community organisations, which felt they had been listened to and consulted on the sort of criteria that should be used. For instance, one concern raised by individual community organisations was whether a large not-for-profit or, indeed, for-profit organisation could come over the top and apply to run these local community services, with which local organisations would not have the capacity to compete in putting their tenders together. One of my submissions to that process was to make sure that there was local capacity building and local presence as part of the criteria. That ended up being one of the considerations, and people said that they were grateful for that. An extensive process began in June 2017, leading up to the tender being released a year later. It was difficult. We actually extended the previous funding. Some people said that this extension was creating more uncertainty, but we did that so that organisations had an opportunity to have a say on the tender criteria and could be assisted in putting their tenders together. As I have said before in this house, that assistance included funding to Linkwest and workshops run by the Department of Communities, with the aim of giving local organisations the tools and capacity to put in tender applications and to best reflect the good work they are doing in their community.

I will make a couple of other points. One is in relation to the People Place. I understand some of the good work that the People Place does, which has been reflected by not only the member for Vasse, but also Hon Adele Farina, a member for the South West Region, who has spoken to me about this issue. The member for Vasse gave examples of the support provided through the Radiance network for women experiencing postnatal depression, the South West Autism Network and the sort of carer support work that is done throughout communities. I understand that.

Organisations in five communities were not successful in the tender process, and there was no other organisation in the locale that was successful. That included Busselton, Collie, Kalgoorlie, Karratha and Newman. The department was concerned that although the existing centres had not met the tender criteria, there was no other organisation in that town or location that was able to provide a service. We were particularly attuned to making sure that something was done in those areas. It was for that reason that we agreed to extend the current funding to give the department and those organisations time to get together and discuss whether what they were doing actually met the criteria; and, if it did, to make sure that that was reflected in another opportunity to bid; and, if it did not, to work out how to make sure that the organisations did meet the tender criteria. The idea was to really give them support to be successful in their funding. This is a difficult process; we have limited funds. There is just over \$6.5 million. I wish we had unlimited funds to give to community organisations. I understand that they do good work—I have visited a lot of them—but those organisations do need to meet tender criteria, which is independently evaluated by not just the Department of Communities, but also other representative bodies within government.