

Division 72: Communities — Service 1, Community and Family Support, \$8 895 000; Service 2, Child Care Services, \$6 427 000; Service 3, Strategic Policy and Coordination, \$16 208 000; Service 4, Redress Scheme for Children and Young People Abused in the Care of the State, \$5 772 000 —

Mrs J. Hughes, Chairman.

Mr D.A. Templeman, Minister for the Environment representing the Minister for Communities.

Ms S. Barrera, Acting Director General.

Mr A. Watt, Acting Executive Director, Resources.

Ms F.J. Lander, Acting Executive Director, Community Engagement.

Mr B.P. Jolly, Acting Executive Director, Policy and Planning.

The CHAIRMAN: I ask members whether they would like to deal with all four services concurrently.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes, we can deal with them together.

The CHAIRMAN: The member for Serpentine-Jarrahdale.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: I refer to the major initiatives for 2008-09 listed on page 1160. The seventh dot point under the heading “Seniors and Volunteering” states —

Continue the development of volunteering benchmarks and indicators.

How does the department benchmark volunteering and what sort of indicators are there for volunteering in our community? It is always very hard to get a clear indication of the level of volunteering. I want to know how the department benchmarks the indicators of volunteer work in our community.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for Serpentine-Jarrahdale for his question. As the member may be aware, from 2008-09 to 2011-12 the Department for Communities will develop a community participation volunteering strategic plan. The strategic planning process will identify supplementary benchmarking data requirements and also strategies that will be employed for creating or accessing such data.

[9.20 pm]

There are a number of important issues and implications for volunteering in the future. The ageing of the population will influence volunteering, as will the demographic spread of the population across regional, rural and metropolitan areas. The aim of the department’s strategic plan is to map and benchmark trends. That will inform the Department of Communities of ways of responding to issues ultimately impacting on volunteering and communities in the future. It is important to be aware of the changing nature of the population and the demands being placed on communities. We now see a larger number of people living in single-person dwellings; that is one of the fastest growing statistics in our community. People are more mobile and are moving in and out of various communities, both interstate and intrastate. It is important to map and benchmark these sorts of trends and variables so that we can continue to support and encourage volunteering. I know that the member is a very keen supporter of volunteers in his community, as I am sure all members are. We need to continue to monitor that information.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: The minister has mentioned a couple of things there are very true of my communities and the volunteer work they do. Is the government considering any way of reimbursing volunteers in some way? Is anything like that being talked about in that process? When I am out in the community, one of the main issues raised by people who do this kind of work is that the price of fuel hurts most, because many are driving around and picking up people. This is something that has crossed my mind, but I am not sure how it can be addressed. Has there been much talk about that sort of process?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for the question; it is very important. There is no doubt that rising petrol prices are impacting on a lot of people who volunteer, particularly those on fixed incomes. The Rudd federal Labor Party, before it was elected to government in November last year, made a commitment to implement a program that would consider how volunteers could be reimbursed or supplemented. I am not sure whether there were definitive details in the budget just handed down by the federal government. However, it was an election commitment by the present federal government. An allocation has been made through the volunteer grants program that will assist in this area. From 1 July 2008, it is expected that the federal government will expand the number of items eligible for funding under the program to include petrol vouchers for people who use their vehicles for volunteering purposes. That is a very positive initiative by the Rudd Labor government. Another important point is that some volunteer organisations already provide supplements for petrol at a particular rate per kilometre, which is important. Some organisations have fleet vehicles that are used as part of their volunteer work that are available to the volunteers for transportation. This is an important issue, particularly given the impact of rising petrol prices. The announcement by the federal government is very promising.

Western Australia delivers generous Seniors Card benefits to seniors who volunteer. The member is aware that Western Australia's Seniors Card is the best in Australia in terms of generosity and breadth of concessions that are provided. They include concessions for public transport use.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Volunteering Western Australia does a fantastic job but its quarters in West Perth are quite cramped. Is there a plan to find it a new home? Lotterywest has set up many volunteer organisations and volunteer groups use it. Volunteering WA has a great home. However, its wings have grown and it has an ageing community that can be put back into the volunteer sector to give them meaning in life. Are there any plans to provide Volunteering WA with a better facility in the future?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for the question. He is exactly right. Volunteering WA is recognised as the peak volunteering body in the state and is affiliated with the national network. I know the facilities that it operates under at Lotterywest House. Although it provides for its current needs, the matter has been raised with me by the Office of Seniors Interests and Carers. Obviously a business case would need to be developed regarding building new premises for Lotterywest House or moving Volunteering WA into another building. The funding would need to be provided by a Lotterywest grant. I am sure that the Minister for Seniors and Volunteering is very keen to assist wherever possible. The important consideration from the point of view of the Minister for Communities is the support of the policy development and the operation and support of volunteer organisations through policy development and support. I understand that Volunteering WA is not funded for specific capital works programs; they must be delivered through Lotterywest. Many corporate bodies throughout the state are very keen to support volunteers. The member is aware that the state government funds a number of volunteer resource centres throughout the state in metropolitan and regional centres. The organisations operate at a very effective grassroots level to support organisations within communities and work to attract, retain and also match volunteers to groups and organisations within the community. That network is actively supported by the Department for Communities through the Office of Senior Interests and Carers.

[9.30 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: While we are on the subject of volunteering, does it include volunteers such as those involved in the Safety House program and those sorts of programs? Do they fall within your portfolio?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The Office for Seniors Interests and Volunteering is really the government's policy and operational arm, and so it is an office that is resourced by officers to support any organisation in Western Australia that may require information, support and access to resources to support their efforts. Those sorts of programs would, of course, certainly be eligible to access the support of the office.

The CHAIRMAN: Considering it may fall within the minister's area, the volunteers who work under the Safety House program must obtain police clearances before they can become active volunteers and participate in the Safety House program. The onus of getting a police clearance falls on the volunteers before they can be recognised. One of the things that we were able to do to assist the volunteers was to apply for a proceeds-of-crime grant. Of course, the grant is for only a year. Would it be possible to assist the Safety House program volunteers by ensuring that the type of grants that are available under the proceeds-of-crime mechanism can continue to be made, so that those volunteers are not put to the expense of having to pay to be a volunteer to serve their community?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: As I am sure the Chairman is aware, the current legislation in Western Australia requires anybody who is working with children to apply for and be granted a working with children check. The working with children check is a very important mechanism to ensure that volunteers who seek to work with children and young people have had adequate screening, as it were, to ensure that they are appropriate people to work with that particular target group. That is now a requirement by law in Western Australia. It applies to all people working with children in both professional and voluntary capacities. Voluntary organisations, or organisations that use volunteers, will quite often have as part of their particular policies and procedures—in fact, if they do not, they need to—a process whereby police checks may be required. That is a reasonable requirement because, of course, it is a protection, not only for the person —

The CHAIRMAN: I am not complaining about the requirement.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: — but also the organisation.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: It is the cost.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Quite a substantial subsidy is given, which includes the working with children check. I think, from memory, the average cost for a working with children check is about \$80, and it is subsidised, particularly if the person is a volunteer. I think there is a different scale if the person is a paid worker. The Office for Seniors Interests and Volunteering has ensured that a subsidised police clearance can now be obtained for

volunteers for the sum of \$10, which I think is a not unreasonable amount, and that is for a national police clearance.

The CHAIRMAN: I thank the minister.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: It is good to see that the member for Serpentine-Jarrahdale has one of those cards.

Mr B.S. WYATT: I refer to the first dot point under the subheading “Youth” on page 1160 of the *Budget Statements*. I am interested in the resource that is to be developed this year to inform young people about how to initiate change in the community. In my electorate I have a couple of very active 16 and 17-year-olds. They are very active on the youth advisory council for the Town of Victoria Park. They are also very active in the Youth Parliament, which has fallen away in prominence over the past few years. I would like it to receive more support, not necessarily in the form of greater resources, but by being given more prominence on the parliamentary agenda. Can the minister give me some information about how that resource will operate and what it will look like when it is completed?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for the question. I will ask Ms Fiona Lander to respond, but before she does I highlight that I am a former Minister for Youth. The former Office for Children and Youth—now the Office for Youth—has over a number of years provided a range of resources for young people. Those resources range from published information through to workshops and initiatives that focus on ensuring that young people have skills, opportunities and resilience—resilience has been one of the key focuses for the office over the past couple of years, and certainly during my time as Minister for Youth. I am not saying that the office is undervalued, but I think not enough people know about the tremendous work that is done through the office. When I was Minister for Youth, I was very impressed with the quality of resources delivered through the office. The member’s question is about what this particular resource will look like. I am sure Ms Lander will be able to provide more detail on that.

Ms F.J. Lander: I cannot tell the member exactly what the resource will look like, but it is about social activism and it fits into the government’s social inclusion agenda. It will be a practical guide to assist young people in the use of all the avenues open to them to effect change in their communities. It links in with our climate change project and social inclusion. The youth advisory councils are part of this because they use local government as a means of social activism. We hope that there will be some training attached to the guide. We will go to youth advisory councils and try to get them to use other means to lobby within their local communities. It will cover a range of different options available to young people that mean something to young people. We talk about polling and lobbying politicians, but whether those things mean anything to young people is another question. We need to speak to them in their language, and the resource will be very much aimed at young people and the communication vehicles they use, such as SMS.

Mr B.S. WYATT: Is there a time frame on that?

Ms F.J. Lander: It was to be developed in 2008-09, but our project plan indicates that it will be developed by December 2008.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: I refer to the third dot point under the “Seniors and Volunteering” subheading on page 1160, which states —

Develop a mental wellbeing self assessment tool for mature age workers.

What would a mental wellbeing self-assessment tool for mature-age workers look like?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The Department for Communities assessment tool will measure employees’ physical, social and emotional wellbeing. The development will be in two phases. The first is a qualitative assessment of a sample target group’s reactions to the concept of a self-help guide and booklet. The second phase will include either modification of the booklet or development of a new tool based on the findings of the research in stage one. This is an important area, particularly given the growing expectation that people will remain in employment in either a part-time or full-time capacity into their mature years. The aims of this tool are to ensure that we are informed about how mature-age workers in particular benefit from remaining in the workforce and to assess their mental wellbeing. When I was Minister for Seniors and Volunteering, I remember learning that many men experience mental health issues upon reaching retirement age. The same happens with some women, but the study I read particularly related to men. The statistics show that an increasing number of men are experiencing depression and mental health decline. The statistics for the number of men who die within a couple of years of retiring is quite significant. What we are trying to do with this tool is ensure that we arm matured-aged people who remain in the workforce with appropriate information and support.

[9.40 pm]

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: If I do a mental wellbeing self-assessment check and find out that I have problems, where to from there?

Mr B.S. WYATT: I can tell the member!

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: The member for Victoria Park is suggesting that I would struggle to complete the test!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I could not possibly say that. The important thing is to ensure that mature people are aware of the indicators that there may be something —

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: That they are losing it!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: We must be realistic about this in the same way that former Premier Jeff Kennett was realistic about it when he established beyondblue. We must reach the more difficult target groups that will not admit or recognise that particular issues are impacting on their mental and physical health. If we can provide them with tools to acknowledge that, they might seek professional and medical help to deal with their issues. That will help to prolong their lives and ensure that they have meaningful lives in their mature years.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: There is something slightly absurd in the notion of a self-assessment test that checks whether one has mental problems. That could be a depressing experience.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The self-assessment checks can be done by the person concerned or with the help of a partner or family member. It is quite important to give people those opportunities. It might be the first time they realise that something is wrong. They may have recognised certain behaviour and not known that they were suffering from depression or some other significant health issue they needed to address.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: I want to express a serious concern about this. Any self-assessment tool necessarily involves a dumbing down of the process. I have seen on websites a tick list that people go through to assess whether they meet the criteria for a certain psychiatric disorder. It is alarming because it can create the perception in the mind of the people doing the test that they have something wrong with them. How can there be a self-assessment tool that provides useful information?

The CHAIRMAN: We are going around in circles.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The member is reading more into it because of his concern that that is the case. The fact is that this is a research project that will be delivered in two phases. The first phase is to sample a target group. The second phase is to look at the results achieved through the sampling of that group to determine whether modification of the material or the development of a new tool is needed. It is about ensuring that information is made available to an important target group. To be totally honest with the member, it is by no means meant to do some of the things that the member is concerned about.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: It is difficult to see how it can be structured to do anything other than allow —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I think the member is reading too much into it.

The CHAIRMAN: We will move on to the next question.

Mr B.S. WYATT: This might be a matter of reflection as opposed to a question. A frustrating issue in my electorate is the amount of volunteering that crossing guards do as opposed to the combination of how much they can receive before it affects their pension. It is both a commonwealth and state issue. I find that pensioners are no longer volunteering to take on the role of crossing guards in my electorate because the pay, while not large, is starting to impact on their pension. Has that come to the minister's attention in his volunteering capacity? It is causing some consternation, quite regularly, in my electorate.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Technically, they are not volunteers; effectively, they are paid. The days of somebody collecting his 10-year, 20-year or 30-year badge for being with a group or organisation is becoming a rarity. Research by a Curtin University doctor into baby boomers showed that the trend in volunteering is that, in general, people will tend to volunteer for shorter periods, for specific tasks and for specific periods of time and it will be outcomes based. They may seek to volunteer with or for an organisation for a particular outcome. In recent times volunteering has been a pathway to employment. With the economy booming and unemployment rates so low, a number of people who might have been engaged in volunteering now find themselves in the workforce to a varying degree of capacity. That is one of the trends in volunteering. However, it means—and this is something that is impacting on crossing guards—that there are many more people looking for greater flexibility. They might not actually want to lock themselves into a specific time on a specific day because their lives are more complex, they have a variety of interests and they are busier than they have been in the past. That is impacting on crossing guards. How much they are paid is also an important issue in this case because, the member is right, under the current arrangements with pensions, if they go over the tipping point it will have negative implications on their benefits and, ultimately, other benefits that they may be eligible for. I understand the federal government will be looking at the whole tax regime. I hope it does it quicker than it announced because pensioners are one group that are feeling the pinch at the moment. I have spoken to my local federal member and I have written to the Prime Minister about pensioners and their circumstances. An overhaul review

of the tax system will not happen fast enough to deal with the issues many pensioners are experiencing at the moment.

[9.50 pm]

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: I think the minister is spot-on regarding the process the member for Victoria Park raised about crossing guards. I am sure the minister will agree that many of our senior volunteers, those on fixed incomes and perhaps the pension, are probably taxed under the broad spectrum. If people like us do a second job, it eats into our tax. We should be lobbying the federal government to vary the level of tax so that they can work as crossing guards, for example, so that their benefits are not affected. The member raised a good point.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: With regard to the point the minister made when he told me I was reading too much into the dot point I asked about, if the minister or one of his advisers can assure me that the mental wellbeing self-assessment tool is not either a computer-based or paper-based criteria tick list that can end up suggesting to users that they may have a range of mental disorders, I will be reassured. It is a very specific question. Can the minister say that this mental wellbeing self-assessment tool for mature-aged workers is definitely not a diagnostic tick list that can end up suggesting a range of mental health disorders?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The short answer is that it is not a diagnostic test.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: That is not my question.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Quite frankly, I believe the member is reading too much into this; however, he needs to take up this particular issue with the minister.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: In plain English, what is a mental wellbeing self-assessment tool for mature aged workers?

The CHAIRMAN: The minister has not finished his answer.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: This is a proposal that has not been developed yet. It will, first of all, focus on a sample group. The minister will then, as part of the first and second phases, determine where the project may go from there. I honestly believe that the member is reading too much into it and bringing in some sort of other diagnostic issues that, quite frankly —

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: I asked a specific question.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am not in a position to answer the member's question. If he wishes to pursue the matter, he should ask the appropriate minister, because it is being developed.

The CHAIRMAN: The minister has given the answer.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: The minister has not actually given the answer. I am asking a specific question.

The CHAIRMAN: I thank the advisers; it is very late tonight. I also thank the members of the committee. That completes consideration of the estimates by this committee.

The appropriation was recommended.

Committee adjourned at 9.54 pm
