

Division 29: Fire and Emergency Services, \$158 366 000 —

Mrs L.A. Munday, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Minister for Environment representing the Minister for Emergency Services.

Mr D. Klemm, Commissioner.

Ms G. Camarda, Chief Financial Officer.

Mr R. Burnell, Executive Director, Corporate Services.

Mr C. Waters, Deputy Commissioner, Operations.

Mr M. Carter, Executive Director, Rural Fire Division.

Ms M. Pexton, Deputy Commissioner, Strategy and Emergency Management.

Mr M. Dixon, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with these details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall only be examined in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by close of business Friday, 3 June 2022. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: If I can just be indulged by the chair and members today, I just wanted to make special mention that we have a new Department of Fire and Emergency Services deputy commissioner in Mel Pexton. Many people will know Mel as the state recovery controller for the cyclone Seroja response. It is wonderful to have her as deputy commissioner and she is the first woman deputy commissioner in Western Australia. This is her very first day on the job.

The CHAIR: No pressure!

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Straight into uniform and straight into estimates so —

The CHAIR: No better learning place, minister.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: She might have left it a day or two later to take up the position, but she is very keen to get involved and I know that members opposite, particularly the member for Moore, will have had contact with the new deputy commissioner in terms of her great work in our midwest after Seroja. While I am here, can I also make special mention of the retired deputy commissioner Mal Cronstedt, who spent many years in the service of protecting Western Australians in DFES and its predecessor agencies. Mal was a volunteer in 1976 and joined the Bush Fires Board of WA full-time in 1982. I gather that Mal is sailing on the Swan River somewhere today and not having to attend estimates for the first time in a number of years, so we wish him all the best.

The CHAIR: Lucky man. Thank you very much. Before I start, I just want to let you know that we have three divisions to get through from 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm, so we are just going to keep you up to date with that. Who would like to start? Member for Vasse.

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to page 471 under the table of “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies.” I want to ask about the bushfire mitigation activity fund. My understanding is that when this fund first began, a contribution was made to local governments for planning to undertake some bushfire mitigation activity. Can the minister confirm that funding was dedicated to that purpose and perhaps explain why that funding is no longer available?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: My awareness of the portfolio from when I was minister is that certainly local government is still funded to plan for mitigation burns. The commissioner is pointing out that that is included in a couple of line items under “Bushfire Risk Management Planning”.

Ms L. METTAM: Can I just clarify that because it is different from the local government feedback that I have received that funding to local governments will be ongoing so that they can undertake their bushfire mitigation funding activities?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will just refer to the commissioner for more detail on that one.

Mr D. Klemm: Thank you, minister. The funding for the bushfire risk management planning process is listed in the line item under “Bushfire Mitigation Activity Fund”. Under the structure, the bushfire risk management planning process funds and assists local governments to develop a plan, which then gets ticked off by the Office of Bushfire Risk Management, which sits within DFES. Once the local government plan has been approved, it opens up the bushfire mitigation activity fund for local government to apply for a grant to undertake mitigation activities against the plan on any given year. An extensive amount of detail sits underneath that, which I can get from the executive director of the rural fire division, Murray Carter, if that is what the minister wants to do. We started off with a very small number of plans and that has grown exponentially over the last three or four years. I think we are up to around about 80 now, but Murray will certainly be able to talk to that, minister.

Ms L. METTAM: Perhaps the planning process was fully funded in its first year, but now it is only 50 per cent funded.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will get Murray to elaborate on this, but my understanding is that there is an obligation on the local government to do its work in terms of putting its plan together. At that point, it can seek funding for mitigation burns but —

Mr D. Klemm: Indeed, it could be for burning or slashing—any of those activities—but not necessarily just burning.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: There is a range of mitigation. Is Murray able to elaborate?

[4.20 pm]

Mr M. Carter: The commissioner is quite correct in that the original funding started three years ago—nearly four years—when the rural fire reforms were announced. We started with 16 local governments so we had shared bushfire risk planning coordinators across those. We have now expanded over that period and we have 90 local governments in the program now. On the way, approximately two-thirds of those have had completed their bushfire risk management plans through the assistance of the risk planning funding, and then that opens up eligibility for the mitigation activity fund, which funds groundworks under the other line item there. We have needed to move some of the local government support into the new local governments as we have expanded the program. As we are moving them through, they are picking up additional local governments. Some local governments, particularly in the south west, have had plans for a number of years. Their plans are complete and in the implementation phase, so we have had to shift the support further east into the great southern and wheatbelt shires to support them on the way through.

Ms L. METTAM: It is a very valuable program. In terms of the rollout of this program across the region that I represent in part, what has been its progress to date and what is hoped to be achieved over the next 12 months?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Is the member talking about —

Ms L. METTAM: In the City of Busselton and the Shire of Augusta–Margaret River.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes. I will get Murray to respond.

Mr M. Carter: Yes, absolutely. Both of those are real success stories. The City of Busselton was particularly proactive in getting in early, and the Shire of Augusta–Margaret River was actually one of the first ones. Prior to the 16 that I alluded to, a pilot program was run in four of those areas and Augusta–Margaret River was one of the first four. It has been in it almost as long as any of them. Both were made eligible through the completed and approved plans very early in the piece, which the commissioner referred to, and have now had several years’ access to the mitigation activity fund for on-ground activity and have used that very successfully. In fact, earlier this fire season, the suppression of the fire in the Meelup Regional Park between Dunsborough and Cape Naturaliste was directly supported by some mitigation activity fund burns that were conducted on the outskirts of Dunsborough, which are of significant benefit. That is a very recent example of where that is starting to have some success. Similarly, through Augusta–Margaret River we are starting to see some traction on the ground whereby smaller burning and mechanical mitigation works around town sites have assisted with bushfire suppression operations for bushfires, such as in my example before. Some of the mitigation works done by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and others have been assisted by adjacent smaller burns that were done last year by brigades and funded through the mitigation activity fund. Both those local governments the member referred to have been very successful in that area.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I turn to page 471 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, and the Emergency Services Volunteer Fuel Card. Before I ask the question, I also congratulate the new deputy commissioner and wish her every success in her role. The Emergency Services Volunteer Fuel Card was originally valued at \$2 000 per brigade group or unit, and it was then reduced to \$1 000 in the first budget of the Labor government. Has that cut been reversed and what level is the fuel card at now, given that the price of fuel in regional WA has doubled since the card was first introduced?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Have we reversed the cut? When we came to government, there was no provision to further fund that card, so it faced the fact that it was not going to be funded at all. We recognised the importance of the card.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Was it royalties for regions?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I am explaining to members that in the budget, there was no provision for this fuel card funding to be extended. We decided to reverse that decision and make it available.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Is the answer that there will be no increase in the value of the fuel card?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, member, it is still \$1 000 per card.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you. I have a different question. I refer to page 471 again and “Local Government Emergency Services Grants”. Could the minister please provide a breakdown of this item? Does it include the local government grant scheme? It is about halfway down the table.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: My advice is that it does.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It does include the local government grant scheme.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The funding for the local government grant scheme seems to be somewhat stagnant, but we know that the emergency services levy is increasing throughout the forward estimates. Why is that funding being held at that level?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I can seek some more elaboration. As the member would probably be aware, the starting point is to work out what is an appropriate level of funding for our emergency services in Western Australia and the range of services and equipment that we have to provide to keep Western Australians safe. The member is talking about the ESL, which is an element of that in terms of that grant provision for those particular groups. Not every element that makes up the cost of emergency services is increasing by five per cent, but the global figure that was worked out was a requirement to fund our emergency services at a certain level. I imagine that not every line item is increasing by five per cent. It is based on need, and I am sure that some of the line items go up by a greater figure. It is a needs-based budget, as the member would imagine.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Is the minister saying that the need is stagnant?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: No. I am saying that the global figure for the funding needs to be agreed upon and that then translates to an increase in the ESL charge for households. Within that budget for the items that the ESL helps to fund are a range of provisions that go up by varying degrees each year according to need.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Further to that point, does the minister know whether the grants for 2022–23 have been decided at this point; and, if so, can they be provided to the committee?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Is the member talking about the requests from local government?

Mr R.S. LOVE: Yes, the local government capital grants.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: For this budget period, I will defer to the commissioner.

Mr D. Klemm: The local government emergency services grants line item is made up of operating capital grants. The capital grants are for trucks and the like. The member will see some carryovers where the number goes up and down in the preceding years. Those carryovers are due to some issues with cab chassis delivery, most of it centred around supply chain issues caused by COVID and other events. The actual operating grant component sees a history of the last two years of expenditure for each local government and that drives funding in the subsequent year. Any sort of increase in costs that might occur in a local government operating grant will get picked up in an increase going forward. It very much just replicates that history of expenditure.

[Mr D.A.E. Scaife took the chair.]

Mr R.S. LOVE: I think I have finished with that point.

[4.30 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 260 of budget paper No 3 and the line item “Emergency Services Levy”. It states that the estimated actual for 2021–22 is \$373 million and for 2022–23 it is \$398 million. That is a 6.6 per cent increase in the emergency services levy. Why was the government advertising last week, as part of the budget, that the emergency services levy is going up by only five per cent?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: There is an explanation here and Georgina would be the best person to explain it.

Ms G. Camarda: Within our budget papers, the increase in the emergency services levy average residential charge is budgeted to go up by five per cent for category 1. The five per cent increase was in the average residential charge for category 1. On the actual collection of the ESL, we collected \$391.3 million in 2021–22, and we will be collecting \$417.5 million this coming financial year. That is a 6.7 per cent increase in ESL revenue, but the five per cent in the budget papers was about restricting the increase in the average residential charge for category 1.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It does not represent the increased charge to the householder, which is still five per cent.

Ms G. Camarda: That is right. In fact, we have the latest property data from Landgate that we will be using to raise the levy. The latest property data will result in the average residential charge for category 1 going up by 4.8 per cent—so, just a little bit less than the five per cent that was budgeted for.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Can the minister see how this is confusing to the average person on the street looking at the budget when it says operating revenue of the government and it shows a 6.6 per cent increase? As I said, the Premier and everyone else advertised that the levy was going up by only five per cent.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The key to this is how it will affect the pocket of a householder. That is the number that people want to know. As the member just heard, it is actually below five per cent; it is 4.8 per cent. One could say that we were wrong on the upside. I understand what the member is saying about total revenue, but the key is how it will affect category 1 householders, which is the vast majority of people who pay the ESL. The full service in the metropolitan area will increase by 4.8 per cent. We have said to householders that it is going to be five per cent, but it will be a bit less than that. As I understand it, as a householder, it will be defined in the rates notice and the amount will be apportioned in the rates payment.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Is there a breakdown of how much of this levy ends up in the regional areas versus the metro area? Does the minister have a general figure?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, I am happy to pass it on in detail, but I would imagine, as a sort of first examination, and knowing the amount of investment in resources right across Western Australia—I might be going out on a limb—that it is actually a higher proportion than the ESL raised from category 1 in the metro area and elsewhere. Would the commissioner like to elaborate?

Mr D. Klemm: It is a difficult figure to get to because many parts of our business are funded and they service both metro and country. A really good example of that is our 000 call centre, which takes 000 calls from all around the state. We do not necessarily attribute the cost of that to either metro or country. Similarly, our aerial fleet, which is obviously very active during the bushfire season, just gets funded and it operates in either the metro or country area, wherever it is needed. I could keep going with our academy, which develops all the training packages that are used in both metro and country. A whole range of staff operate in both metro and country, so it is very difficult to get that really clean slice to say that we spend this much there and we spend that much there.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: There is a lot of blurring, as the member would know. When there is a big fire, metropolitan firefighters, including volunteers, go out to the regions and vice versa. We sometimes call regional firefighting crews to the cities. It is impossible to distinguish.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: These increases are starting to impact quite heavily on some of the rate bases of regional landholders, if you like. But we will leave at that.

MR R.S. LOVE: I would like to ask a question about the emergency services helicopter, but before I do that, I would just like to correct the minister. That is actually a copy of the 2016–17 budget and forward expenditures for royalties for regions showing that the volunteer fuel card was indeed funded from royalties for regions in the 2016–17 budget. I will leave the copy with the minister when he leaves the chamber. He can then read it at his leisure.

I move now to page 460 of budget paper No 2, volume 2. Under “Ongoing Initiatives” in the spending changes, the second line item is “Emergency Services Rescue Helicopter—New Lease Arrangements”. What consideration has been given to basing an emergency services helicopter in Geraldton? Given the expansion of tourism into the Abrolhos Islands, the growing development of many mines and gas plants et cetera within the area and the recent experience of cyclone Seroja, surely it is an opportune time, with a \$5.7 billion budget, for the government to consider providing a basic and necessary lifesaving service within the midwest.

[4.40 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The aerial capacity of DFES is an important issue. It has received a lot of extra funding in recent years. I remember when we came to government that the south west emergency helicopter service was not funded and needed to be to provide that service as well. We have a very large state, member, and we need to work out the best options to cover all of Western Australia. The member would be aware of the budget announcement of a major investment in three new helicopters with increased range to get to more of Western Australia. I imagine that we will never be able to buy a helicopter that can travel to any point in Western Australia given that it is such a large state, but the range of these new helicopters is significantly increased. When we talk about Geraldton and the midwest, the new helicopters on order have the ability to fly directly through, I believe, most of the midwest—certainly to Geraldton. The issue is with the 700-kilometre range. Those helicopters will need to be refuelled to make a return journey that is outside that 700-kilometre range capacity. I think that is actually good news.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Could the minister clarify that it is a 350-kilometre return trip range? When the minister says “700-kilometre range”, what does he mean? I understood it to be a 350-kilometre range.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: My understanding is that the helicopter has a 700-kilometre range. The point at which it would have to be refuelled is after it has travelled more than 350 kilometres in one direction, because it would need to be refuelled to get back.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Yes. So it is a 350-kilometre radius from Perth that is covered. They are not going to be flown to the Abrolhos.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: No. Member, that is if the helicopter wants to return.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Most people would.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: There will be many instances in which they may want to return immediately without landing, but there will be many instances in which helicopters are required to land so that they can be refuelled. So that increases the range dramatically, with a 700-kilometre one-way radius. We can talk about getting much further than 350 kilometres to do the work that is required, and if the helicopter can be refuelled, it can come back within that 700-kilometre range. Helicopters are required in all sorts of circumstances. It is disingenuous to say that this does not dramatically increase the capability and range of the service provided.

Mr R.S. LOVE: With regard to my original question, is there no plan from this government to base a helicopter in the midwest? It is a yes or no answer; it is simple enough.

The CHAIR: I just want to be clear before the minister answers this, because I made a ruling earlier today. My view on relevance when it comes to the appropriations is that you cannot ask questions that say, “I would like you to spend the money on something else.” It has to be a question about the appropriation that is actually before the house. My ruling on asking about projects that are not funded in the budget papers is that that is not relevant. I will allow these questions if the minister is willing to indulge them, because I do not want to stand in the way of a discussion about it, but I do not think that these questions are relevant unless there is a line item that is funding that initiative. It is a matter for the minister whether he wants to respond to this.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thank you, chair, for that guidance. In terms of what is before us in this budget, it is an announcement about the funding of a brand new fleet of three helicopters that will dramatically increase the capability and range of that service. That is a good thing for all of Western Australia, whether it is the midwest, the south west or wherever, because it will increase the ability of those helicopters to respond. We will always consider the requirements of the state based on the advice from people in DFES about what is the best location, and those discussions are ongoing, but this is a dramatic increase in service and capability and it will increase the ability of those helicopters to travel not just to the midwest, but also further afield. This budget has provided extra funding to make that happen.

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to page 466 of the *Budget statements* and the asset investment program. The first paragraph refers to the prioritisation of new and replacement stations that involves the consideration of demographics, dwellings and traffic volumes. In terms of the prioritisation of stations and the recommendations of the 2011 Keelty report, is consideration being given at this stage for a Vasse career station? I understand there has been a land swap. I understand that DFES currently has land in the City of Busselton for this purpose and previous considerations determined that it would be dependent on population growth and demand. Clearly, that has happened, so I want some feedback on where that project is at.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: As the member would be aware, career fire stations exist in Perth and, I think, the major regional centres of Bunbury, Geraldton, Albany et cetera. They do not exist in every local community in every town. As the state grows, more pressure and decisions will need to be made about where we increase the number of career fire stations in the regions. Having said that, I would not undervalue the ability of the volunteer services across the state, including in the Vasse region, to respond. The member would be aware that they are very capable and very dedicated. I know that in my electorate of Baldivis we have a volunteer fire and emergency service response. They attend all the incidents that a career crew would attend, they have the same equipment and they perform to the same high level. We are well served, whether we rely on a career station or a volunteer-based station. The people of Dunsborough and Vasse are well served by their current volunteer service. It is a case of looking at where the need arises. The next new career fire station is going to be located in the south east of Perth—Byford way. The member talked about population growth and where the need is most apparent. I know that there has been a lot of growth in Dunsborough, but I think that as the city expands further to the south east, there has probably been more growth in that south-east corridor around Byford. That requirement is being addressed and that will be where our next new career fire station is located. As I say, the largest regional centres in Western Australia have career stations, and a place like Dunsborough or Busselton would require that extra growth. I know it is happening and it is something that we are always monitoring. I know that DFES is always looking at the demands and where it makes sense to position the next career fire station. But in the interests of the entire state, we need to respond to where demand and growth is highest.

Ms L. METTAM: Were some questions raised about the recommendations in that 2011 report? I guess the reason Vasse was highlighted was that the closest stations are in Bunbury and Albany, it is a region with a high fire risk and its population is increasing? Does the minister have any insight there?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: As I said, member, we still have volunteer brigades right across Western Australia. We have them all through the south west where they are actually highly concentrated. These volunteers are very adept and very skilled. Would the commissioner like to elaborate?

[4.50 pm]

Mr D. Klemm: As the member pointed out, we have managed to secure some land there, which is good forward planning. That land has been there for some period of time. One of the biggest challenges that we often have is that if we do not deal with these things well ahead of time, securing land of the size that we need for career fire stations can be problematic, particularly in the metro area where there is obviously quite often a shortage of blocks of land of the size that we need to get our hands on. I cannot give the member a date or say in what year we are going to build a career fire station in Vasse. The work done by the volunteers, be they from the bushfire brigades or the volunteer fire and rescue service in Busselton, Dunsborough or Bunbury—those two services together—is incredibly effective in their response. If it gets to the point at which the quantum of incidents that occur in that area are becoming problematic for the volunteers, and often that is something the volunteers feed back to us, it is at that point that we would be looking to fund a career station. But at this point in time, I cannot give the member an exact year that we would do that.

Ms L. METTAM: That is okay; thank you.

The CHAIR: New question—the member for Moore.

MR S.A. MILLMAN: Sorry, chair, mine was a further question to the question from the member for Vasse related to regional firefighting services.

The CHAIR: I am giving the call to the member for Moore. If the member for Mount Lawley wants to ask a further question, he can when I give him the call.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you, chair. That was very fair of you. I turn to page 461 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, significant issues impacting the agency and paragraph 5 on the recovery for major events, which outlines the events in Wooroloo, the fires in the wheatbelt and, of course, tropical cyclone Seroja. I want to ask some questions around Seroja and the recovery effort thus far. The minister was the Minister for Emergency Services for much of this period so I am sure he knows a lot of it. I refer to the, I think, \$104.5 million of commonwealth–state funding made available. Could the minister perhaps outline what percentage of those funds have already been granted in each of the programs? If the minister cannot now, could he provide that to me as supplementary information?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, I am happy to, member. With the new deputy commissioner here, we are very aware of the scale of that disaster and the fact that we were able to secure with the commonwealth the biggest joint disaster recovery funding agreement in the state's history. I will go through the amount of money that has been expended in each of those categories but I just want to make a point about the nature of the economy at the moment. It is booming along, there is a shortage of tradespeople and a shortage of materials, which everyone is reporting in terms of building a new home, because of COVID and other supply chain issues. It is never a good time to have a disaster when you need to rebuild, but this is certainly the worst of times for that because it presents particular challenges in getting tradespeople and supplies of materials, with a very stretched insurance industry that is dealing with a range of major disasters on the east coast, with assessments onsite in Western Australia and getting those moneys paid.

There have been some great challenges but I think the response has been enormous. When I was minister, I was very pleased with the breadth and the depth of the response that came from across the major commonwealth–state agreement and went on the ground to provide information and clinics and contacts in many of the smaller communities across the midwest. It has been an enormous effort and the State Recovery Controller has done a magnificent job, as I am sure the member will agree, and it is great to see her in her current role. She will continue to oversee that process. Also, as the member would know, the nature of this funding arrangement is determined by the rules of the agreement. The commonwealth is very precise and ensures that they are followed. The money has to be expended first and then the state repays that money. Then the state goes cap in hand to the federal government for recoupment of 50 per cent of those moneys. If we do not cross every t and dot every i, there is the chance that the state will not be reimbursed. So it is very important we get it right. It is also a very demanding time at the moment, with Western Australia proclaiming 24 disaster events under the arrangement since November 2018. That ranges from flooding events to cyclones, of course, to major bushfires.

The information I have on Seroja is that at the moment, given all that background and the issues about getting tradespeople to do work, remembering that it is a reimbursement arrangement, the current expenditure is \$21.9 million in financial support that has been directly provided to affected residents, businesses and communities. The breakdown

is as follows. I will round these figures. There is close to \$3.3 million in emergency welfare support that has been co-funded with the commonwealth; \$3.85 million in state government emergency assistance; \$7.6 million—again this is rounded to the nearest major number—in disbursements from the Lord Mayor’s Distress Relief Fund; close to \$258 000 in the repair of community recreational assets; and \$5.73 million in relief for power and water outages. There are a range of grants, as the member would be aware, for primary producers, heritage restoration, small businesses and individuals that rely on people applying, going through the process and providing the right information, and then making arrangements for that money to be paid on the disbursement arrangement.

I know there were some issues with farmers. The cyclone was a mixed blessing because it brought in a lot of rain at seeding time, from memory. Farmers, and I have spoken to quite a few of them, were intent on getting the crop in. They might have had damage and issues to address but their priority, quite rightly, was getting the crop in. It turned out to be the best season in Western Australian history with the tonnage so that was the silver lining in the cloud. Of course, at the other end, they had a bumper harvest to get off the farm and get to market. That is the good part but it meant that many farmers put the other issues of responding to and applying for grants as a secondary consideration. It probably turned out to be a good decision because of the bumper harvest they enjoyed.

It is a process and I think there is a two-year window for all applications to be made and processed. We all want things to happen more quickly but given the state of the economy, the circumstances of Western Australia right now and the other issues involved, I think it has been a wonderful success. I know that people have been in awkward situations with housing, and we have responded with caravans and temporary housing. We have responded with temporary accommodation for workers in very small communities. I am not aware of any outstanding issues in that regard but I do know there is an issue right across Western Australia with service worker accommodation, not just tradespeople coming into locations. The deputy commissioner and recovery controller is here so she might like to elaborate. I think I have given a broad picture of the challenges involved.

Ms M. Pexton: If the question has been answered, chair, I am happy to leave it at that, unless there are any further questions.

[5.00 pm]

Mr R.S. LOVE: I think one of the reasons for some of the slow uptake is with the way the grants are structured in some circumstances. For instance, with some of the heritage grants to help rebuild houses, people actually have to do all the work and then claim back the money. I think this system is a bit daunting to people because they have to be able to finance the work themselves and then recoup the money. Can the minister explain, or just elaborate on, whether that system is subject to any review, or if there are will be some changes in the administration of some of those grants to make it more achievable for people to get the money and get the project underway?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I think the member is right. My understanding is that those are the rules of the agreement. Again, I have pointed out that if we as a state do not follow those rules, we will be left to pick up the whole of the cost. This is the federal government we are working with. I am no longer the minister, but I think major events like this always come with lessons, and that is probably something we can talk about. The commissioner would like to elaborate.

Mr D. Klemm: Indeed, I believe the member is quite correct on some of the challenges we had early on with people having to wait until the actual works had been completed and signed off before they could recoup the money. We are really beholden to the federal government on what we can and cannot do in relation to providing the grant and the works have to be completed before the funds can be given. However, we have tried to reduce the time frame to make it a little bit easier on householders who have to pay out the money and then get the funds back and allowed the program to fund directly to the contractor. That will save the contractor having to give an invoice to the home owner, and the home owner having to pay it and then provide the chit, the receipt, under the disaster recovery funding arrangements. We have shortened up that process as much as we can, given the stringent requirements that we have on us from the federal government.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Further to that point, I am bringing it up so that the work can get underway. I know the local community and the local shire are very concerned about people leaving the district because of the loss of housing, so it is very important that whatever incentives are available can be applied to get them back and work underway. Another issue that has also been raised about that recovery program is the lack of flexibility in what the local community can spend on its own community assets. I understand the shire, for instance, is trying to get funding to rebuild along the foreshore in Kalbarri, which is a key environmental and economic asset for the community, and is necessary to get the town back on its feet, but there are some roadblocks in there. Again, I ask whether there is any way that we can reconsider how grants are administered or disbursed to encourage, or enable, that type of redevelopment and get the place back on its feet as quickly as possible.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I think the grants are available directly for the result of damage caused by that specific disaster, but maybe I can refer that to the deputy commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: Thank you, member, for the question. We are working with a number of stakeholders and partners that are supporting the local government, particularly the Shire of Northampton, as the member indicated, against and around the redevelopment of that foreshore area. We are again in a situation under our commonwealth–state arrangement for the disaster recovery funding whereby the core principle is that people build back to the same standard and they can build or repair only the infrastructure that has been damaged. I know that the Shire of Northampton had some grander plans with that for some revitalisation along with some of those repair and reconstruction efforts. We are still working alongside the shire and have had further conversations as early as this week with the commonwealth to see whether we can access some further funding to support it in those endeavours.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thank you. I refer to page 475, under “Bushfire Risk Management”, and the mitigation activity fund emergency services levy grants. Why is there a 45 per cent reduction across the forward estimates between 2022–23 and 2023–24? Can the minister explain that?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will get Mr Murray Carter to elaborate, but I am aware that there have been particular issues in the last couple of years and in the last financial year with COVID preventing works being done. My understanding is that unspent money would be carried over, but Mr Carter will elaborate.

Mr M. Carter: Thank you, minister, and thank you, member. That is exactly correct. The issues that we have had over the previous 12 months and the estimate that we made were not realisable for on-ground works as a result of COVID, access to contractors as a result of that and some other reasons. Therefore, we have rolled over into the extra year. Again, that is not unusual. That has happened for the previous couple of years and will likely happen again. Again, there were the delays we discussed earlier around the plans being completed and approved, and then access to the mitigation activity fund. There were some delays through that difficult period that we have just come out of now, so it is a carryover issue.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Minister, can I ask what has happened with the royalties for regions funding, which seems to disappear altogether after 2023–24? Why has that funding been reduced and will then cease?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thank you, chair. I might refer that to Mr Carter as well.

Mr M. Carter: That is just a straight factor of part of the second lot of royalties for regions funding that has been applied—we are very grateful to receive that—goes to the mitigation activity fund, which appears in these papers, and another part goes to the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and others for crown land works. It is very well received and well utilised. The second round was three-year, fixed-term funding, and that reflects the end of the third year of funding.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Minister, it is obviously a mitigation activity. What would be the majority of activities that are conducted under this ESL grants program? What sort of mitigation is undertaken—two, or three, or four different types of activity? Could the minister explain that?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will get the commissioner to respond.

Mr D. Klemm: It is a mixture of activities from burning which, as the member would be well aware, is very much reliant on appropriate weather conditions, through to slashing, thinning, the construction of strategic breaks and the like. It is centred back to the bushfire risk management plan that is developed in each local government, and the type of vegetation and country in a particular area drives the type of mitigation activity that is undertaken.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: Minister, I refer to page 460, under the heading “New initiatives”. I was after information on the large air tanker. Can the minister please explain the state’s plans for the use of the large air tanker in 2022–23?

[5.10 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Absolutely, member, and thank you for the question. For many years, we know that the intensity of fires in Western Australia has increased. We have a range of aerial craft to assist what goes on on the ground and in the last few years we have also had the large aerial tanker come into play. It serves a good purpose and it is a part of the overall firefighting effort. I think it is very good, as the commissioner can elaborate, in laying containment lines. Until now, we have been fortunate that we could rely on the national aerial fleet to have that tanker located here. It has been here on the goodwill of the national arrangement. That is good when there are no fires in the east or anywhere else in Australia. It might not be good when there are. Therefore, a decision was made at the national level of where that asset should go and where it can be best deployed. There is always a chance, if we ever suffer a major fire, as during the major fires on the east coast a few years ago, we could be without a large aerial tanker asset.

This budget ensures that we will have a presence—it is \$11 million over the forward estimates for a large aerial tanker to be based in Busselton. It is a central location, because a lot of our fires are in the south-west corner of the state, but being a large aircraft, it can travel very swiftly to where it is needed. During that time it will be parked in Busselton, it will be for the exclusive use of Western Australia to fight our fires. I have some figures here for the national LAT. It performed 76 drops, totalling almost a million litres of retardant in WA last summer. We also had some borrowed large aerial tankers as well that dropped about another 500 000 litres of retardant. That is one

and a half million litres of retardant that was dropped and well over a hundred drops in Western Australia. They are a larger aircraft. They have larger capacity, a longer range and they can fly in fairly extreme conditions. They are part of the mix. The choppers get in low and are direct, and the LATs are used to set large containment lines. It is impressive to see them, and I think there is a community expectation now that we need these large aerial tankers in place. We never saw them a few years ago anywhere in Australia and now they are commonplace. It is another extra resource. That is obviously a fairly expensive exercise, but we believe that it is worthwhile. The other thing that I will add is that for this last summer, for the first time we had two Black Hawk aircraft, which were able to operate very well. They are large capacity helicopters. I think it is a great addition to the mix of aerial assets that we have to keep us safe.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thanks to the member for Mount Lawley for the question. My electorate is 5 812 times the size of the Mount Lawley electorate.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The member got out a calculator and a measuring tape!

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: We certainly value the large air tankers.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: He is concerned about the member for Mount Lawley's community, too!

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: To be honest, I attended several fires several fires and we cannot underestimate the value. Minister, I might have missed it, but there is \$2.7 million right through the forward estimates, so is this a hire arrangement or is this a purchase arrangement?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It is a lease arrangement. The commissioner can give the member the details.

Mr D. Klemm: Yes, it is a lease arrangement, and we take it for three months of the bushfire season each year—December through to March. We have some flexibility in the contract to be able to extend if we need to, depending on how the bushfire season goes. There is a degree of flexibility there; it just depends on weather conditions. If we are getting rain at particular times of the year, we might be able to finish it at the end of March, or alternatively extend it through. But certainly, it is a lease arrangement and it is all done through the National Aerial Firefighting Centre; all the states and territories access their leased aircraft through that sort of common tendering arrangement, yes.

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to page 471, underneath the “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies”. I am referring to the “Local Government—Community Emergency Service Managers” line item. Does the small increase in funding between the 2021–22 estimated actual and 2022–23 provide for any increase in the number of community emergency service managers?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I might get the commissioner to respond.

Mr D. Klemm: I could not talk to the amount of some \$90 000 that is the increase there. It may well just be indexation across increasing salaries or costs; I am not sure. It is salary increases, yes, as confirmed by the chief finance officer.

Ms L. METTAM: Are they salary increases?

Mr D. Klemm: Yes.

Ms L. METTAM: At last year's estimates hearings, we learnt there were three local government areas that requested these managers; however, funding was not available to support that request. I understand in Three Springs, Brookton and Mingenew that was not granted. Given the increase in the ESL by more than six per cent a year for the next two years, is there an opportunity to provide more support for additional community emergency service managers?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It is a shared funding model and we rely on the local government to, obviously, jointly fund and be willing to be part of that. We look at where the best locations are for those officers to be deployed. It is often over multiple local government areas, is it not? It can be a shared arrangement between local governments. It is not always one.

Mr D. Klemm: Did the member refer to the Shire of Brookton?

Ms L. METTAM: Yes, Brookton, Three Springs and Mingenew all formerly requested.

Mr D. Klemm: There is a CESM now at Brookton and I think we put that in maybe the last financial year, previous to this one, and it is actually shared across Brookton–Corrigin. As it turned out with that significant fire that was out there earlier this year, and I think maybe in Pingelly, but there is one of those nearby local governments. We have been able to, in some circumstances where a local government has decided it does not want a CESM any longer, and there has been some of those, we have been able to reallocate that funding into other spots and, certainly, Brookton comes immediately to mind. It has a CESM now, shared with other local governments. In the last two years, we have also been able to put one into Serpentine–Jarrahdale as well as a result of another local government pulling out and not wanting it anymore.

[5.20 pm]

Ms L. METTAM: Is the minister or the department aware of the significant inequities when it comes to the employment conditions and salary across the CESMs? Is that what we are calling them—CESMs?

Mr D. Klemm: There are a number of CESMs in the metropolitan area who are DFES employees, and then custom and practice outside the metropolitan area is for the CSM to be a local government employee. In both situations, they are a shared funding arrangement, albeit in rural and regional Western Australia they are a local government employee and DFES provides a grant to the local government for a portion of the salary depending on the rate base of that particular shire or, indeed, collection of shires. In some instances, certainly, there may be a difference between the metro and the country because they are under different awards.

Ms L. METTAM: Just to clarify—I can assume the answer—that small increase in funding had nothing to do with trying to or addressing the inequity issue? Is the minister saying that the reason that there is a difference between CESMs that are employed by DFES or the local government is because the roles are different and the employee arrangements are different?

Mr D. Klemm: Yes. It is about CESMs being on two different awards. That is the issue between the metro and the country. The increases the member can see in the out years, as reported by the CFO, are about salary increases over that time.

Ms L. METTAM: On this particular topic, has the department fully or formally reviewed this issue? Is the minister aware of this issue about the inequity with CESMs in terms of their pay and employee conditions?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Member, appreciate that not being the minister, I am not aware of the current situation or the issues being raised, but I am happy to refer to the commissioner.

Mr D. Klemm: It is pretty well as I have said, member. The people in the metro area are employed under one award and the others in rural and regional WA are employed on a separate award. I think if the member is asking whether they are all be employed by DFES—put them all together with DFES or put them all together with local government, in terms of a review of that—no, we have not done a review of that.

Ms L. METTAM: Yes. That is okay.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 466 and paragraph 4.3 on the \$2.8 million pilot works, including \$355 000 for the fixed repeater tower in Esperance, which will obviously contribute to enhanced bushfire management in that region. Was this one of the recommendations from the coroner's inquiry in 2019 after the devastating Esperance fire in 2015?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, it was, member.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: In 2019, the state coroner handed down 12 recommendations following an inquest into those 2015 fires. The state government supported the majority. In reference to the positive announcement of the repeater finally receiving funding, which recommendations under the 2015 Esperance fire coroner's inquiry have not been fulfilled?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It is a bit difficult to respond in terms of the context of this budget. I think some of the recommendations might apply to agencies other than DFES. One of the recommendations was for a career fire station in Esperance. We have just heard the member for Vasse talking about the need for a career fire station in Busselton. Again, never underestimate the capacity of volunteers and as a state we have an obligation to put our career fire stations where they make sense and where there is greatest need, with a burgeoning population in the metropolitan area and those major regional centres. Esperance, I would have thought, is not of the same scale as Geraldton or Bunbury in terms of size, and we have to make the right judgement that serves the interests for the state.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Would the minister perhaps like to provide by way of supplementary information details of the recommendations that have not been fulfilled?

The CHAIR: I think the difficulty with the question, member, is that it falls foul of the point I made earlier, and the minister reflected that in his original answer, which is that it relates to a document that is not actually the budget papers. You are asking about things that are not in the budget papers. Like I say, I allow these questions if the minister wants to indulge them, but it is not what I would normally contemplate being supplementary information in the process of budget estimates.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I share your point, chair. It is not in the context of the budget and the member already has the ability to put questions on notice to the government.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Has this government allocated additional funds to provide improved fire services for Esperance and the region three years on from the coroner's recommendation?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Absolutely. I point the member to the repeater tower that was pointed out in the budget. The commissioner is telling me that seven new fire appliances have been presented to brigades in the Esperance region.

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to page 461, significant issues impacting the agency and the reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a general question, although specific to that line item, about the role that DFES has undertaken to assist St John Ambulance in driving ambulances. Has this come at any financial cost, or what has been the cost to DFES as an agency?

The CHAIR: Member for Vasse, that was an excellent effort, particularly this late on a Thursday evening, but I am ruling that question out of order on the basis of relevance.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thanks, chair. Sorry; there was one other question I forgot to ask earlier about the large air tanker. Has this been procured or leased, as the commissioner pointed out, from an Australian company or is this from overseas or elsewhere?

Mr D. Klemm: Thanks, member. The final tenderer, or the final contract, has not been decided yet. It is currently with the National Aerial Firefighting Centre and its procurement processes. The contract itself for that particular aircraft has not been awarded.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The next part of my question is: do we have capability within Australia to provide those large air tankers or is it just overseas companies and the like?

[5.30 pm]

Mr D. Klemm: The majority of contractors that provide those aircraft are overseas companies and there are a couple of reasons for that, and one outlier. The couple of reasons for it are that they are put into use around the world for 12 months of the year, so if they are going to own these aircraft, they want them operating and earning money for them as many months of the year as they can. Therefore, they spend some time here and time in Greece and Canada and the US during the Northern Hemisphere summer. Certainly, the large air tankers have been in use in the US and Canada for a lot longer than they have here in Australia, so these are established companies with really good solid track records and safety records. That means they are attractive from a contracting point of view for Australian fire and emergency service agencies. Then there is the expense of setting that up and getting the aircraft and setting it up to drop the water and retardant. Those are a couple of the drivers right now. I think, member, we are approaching a point at which the critical mass of large air tankers in Australia will see some entry of Australian companies into that market. It is worth pointing out that our helicopters, which we also lease or contract, as many fire and emergency service agencies do around Australia, some of those are with Australian companies that operate Helitak water bombers. That capability has been in place in Australia for much longer than the large air tanker capability has. The other point I make is that the New South Wales Rural Fire Service purchased its own large air tanker, as I am sure the member knows, which is a bit of a separate arrangement to the arrangements that we would use.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Okay, thank you.

The appropriation was recommended.

Meeting suspended from 5.31 to 5.40 pm