

Division 62: Communities, \$162 231 000 —

Mr V.A. Catania, Chairman.

Dr G.G. Jacobs, Minister for Health representing the Minister for Community Services.

Ms S. Barrera, Director General.

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

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

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

Dr K. MacArthur, Executive Director, Community Engagement.

Ms S. Withers, Executive Director, Redress WA.

The CHAIRMAN: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard staff. The daily proof *Hansard* will be published at 9.00 am tomorrow.

The estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussion of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. This is the prime focus of the committee. While there is scope for members to examine many matters, questions need to be clearly related to a page number, item, program, or amount within the volumes. For example, members are free to pursue performance indicators that are included in the budget statements while there remains a clear link between the questions and the estimates. It is the intention of the Chairman to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee, rather than asking that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. For the purpose of following up the provision of this information, I ask the minister to clearly indicate to the committee which supplementary information he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the committee clerk by Friday, 5 June 2009, so that members may read it before the report and third reading stages. If the supplementary information cannot be provided within that time, written advice is required of the day by which the information will be made available. Details in relation to supplementary information have been provided to both members and advisers and accordingly I ask the minister to cooperate with those requirements.

I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice with the Clerk's office. Only supplementary information that the minister agrees to provide will be sought by Friday, 5 June 2009.

It will also greatly assist Hansard, if when referring to the program statements volumes or the consolidated account estimates, members give the page number, item, program and amount in preface to their question.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: The member for Joondalup.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: I refer the minister to page 793, "Major Policy Decisions". I require a lot of information and it may be better to have it submitted by way of supplementary information. We are getting lots of queries from our constituents about the seniors' cost-of-living rebate. Can the minister advise how many payments have been made to date; how many are outstanding; when the minister expects to complete payments by; and what proportion of application forms were incomplete or inaccurately filled out? Also, if the minister were to do this again, what would he do differently, having learnt from this? The minister could probably answer that question today.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: In reference to the seniors' cost-of-living rebate, as of 1 May 2009, 224 000 Seniors Card holders had applied for the government's cost-of-living rebate, making it the biggest payment of its type in the history of the state; and 165 000 seniors received their payment before the end of April, with a total payout of \$13 832 250, which means that nearly \$14 million is circulating in the Western Australian community helping our seniors pay for the increased costs they face in day-to-day expenses. Further payments will be made in May and June to those seniors who have been asked to resubmit applications. They have been asked to resubmit applications because the details provided originally were either incorrect or illegible. I have asked the Department for Communities to implement a new system at the Seniors Card centre to enable us to make payments straight to seniors' bank accounts in future years. That is pertinent to the member's question about what we would do differently. That would significantly streamline the payment process.

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Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: Does the allocation across the forward estimates cover the number of Western Australians expected to be eligible for Seniors Cards as at 25 May 2009? Can the minister advise the number of Seniors Card holders who are couples and singles, and the total number of Seniors Cards?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Mr Chairman, because of the specific nature of the question I refer it to the director general, Ms Barrera, to see whether we can tease out some of the figures. The director general has advised me that Brad Jolly, the executive director of policy and planning, will be able to provide the information.

[9.10 pm]

Mr B.P. Jolly: The number of Seniors Card members is 283 000. I am not able to provide information on the number of singles and couples because we are still receiving applications until the end of this month. Until we have received all of the possible applications, we will not be able to provide a definitive figure. That information was not contained in the Seniors Card information system before the commencement of the cost-of-living payments.

Mr F.A. ALBAN: I refer to the fifth dot point under "Significant Issues Impacting the Agency" on page 795. It relates to the review of the Carers Recognition Act 2004. Could the minister please explain what is being done to progress the review of the Carers Recognition Act 2004?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I thank the member for Swan Hills for his question and for joining us in the estimates committee on the Department for Communities. The dot point states —

With the increase in ageing of the population, the number of people with a disability, mental illness, chronic condition or who are frail and who require care and support continues to increase.

It was interesting to see the number of people who sought my audience as the Minister for Mental Health about that whole issue of carers recognition and how they play a part, not only practically but in a legislative way, within the mental health legislation framework. They were concerned about how they are recognised, how they can play a part in a person's recovery, how they can play a part in a person's wellness and how that person maintains wellness in the community and how they are recognised, and recognise the role of carers in a patient's mental health and mental illness. A review of the Carers Recognition Act 2004 was undertaken between June and September last year. It was tabled in both houses of Parliament in November 2008. Since the review, the government has announced a number of policies aimed at achieving greater efficiency in public sector expenditure, so the response to the findings has been informed by those policies. The minister has approved proposals to adopt an outcomes-based approach to addressing the findings of the review so that we can truly have something tangible in the outcome base and also conduct an annual survey of carers based on the outcomes specified in the carers charter. That is an important part of compliance reporting of the relevant agencies.

Compliance with the act will be regarded as a means of achieving an outcome specified in the carers charter, which forms part of the act. That is important for carers and the people who come and talk to me about recognition within the system, for want of a better word. This will not be regarded as an end in itself. It will be assessed and reported in terms of the extent to which outcomes for carers are achieved. The outcomes for carers will be identified, addressed and tracked over time by means of the survey, which will determine which outcomes are most important to carers. That is particularly relevant in my mental health portfolio. What outcomes, for instance, in mental health, which is closer to home for me, are most important to carers? What are their perceptions about the extent to which those outcomes are being achieved? When this is fully operative, the survey will provide a significant foundation for planning and service delivery. In short, the results in the survey will be provided on an annual basis. The outcomes will inform the development of strategies. It is anticipated that the approach will both inform and streamline the process. As far as the outcome focus is concerned, more meaningful and greater relevance to the benefit of carers will enable the objectives of the act to be achieved to a greater extent and streamline and simplify the roles and enable the development of cost-effective strategies to address the review.

Discussions will be held with stakeholders, including Carers WA, the Department of Health, health services, hospital boards and disability services. I would hope that discussions with organisations such as Carers WA and WA Mental Health, which are the groups that actually talk to me, have started and will continue during this project. The first carers survey associated with consultations are expected to be completed this year. The development of strategies to address these findings to the review will then begin. Based on the outcomes of this survey, it is envisaged that development of the strategies and drafting of amendments to the legislation will make it relevant. Having got all that information, associated consultation and familiarisation of reporting agencies with the strategies will be completed by March 2010. The survey is likely to be carried out by staff of the department, and some consulting assistants may be required. We look forward to making sure that the legislation is relevant and effective for carers in WA.

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The CHAIRMAN: I remind the minister that the answers need to be cut down a little. They are not an opportunity to make a ministerial statement.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I have a specific question relating to the second-last dot point on page 795, which relates to the department's coordination of policies and programs to address issues and provide support for women. What has happened to the Indigenous Women's Congress, the advisory council that is linked to the Department for Communities? Is the plan to disband; and, if not, when will the Indigenous Women's Congress next meet?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I do not have the answer to that question. I will refer that question to the director general, or one of the advisers may be able to advise us about some of that detail.

Ms S. Barrera: The Minister for Community Services is currently reviewing the advisory structures for women, including the Indigenous Women's Congress. I am advised that she will shortly be making a decision about her preferred model for advisory structures. That will be made known to the members of the Indigenous Women's Congress.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: When can we expect an announcement by the minister?

[9.20 pm]

Ms S. Barrera: I cannot anticipate how long the minister will take in her deliberations, but I understand that she is reviewing the consultative structures and will make an announcement in due course.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank Ms Barrera for that answer. I am concerned that in this division very little information allows me to direct the minister to a line item for volunteering. From my scanning of the budget, there is no mention of volunteering. If there is, I would like to be directed to it. I am concerned that there is no reference to the trends or issues that are impacting on the agency regarding volunteering. If I could ask a question about volunteering, it would be: where in the budget papers does it show an allocation to the community volunteering agencies—the resource centres that are located throughout the state in various regional and metropolitan centres? Where does that appear in the budget papers and has there been either an increase or a decrease in the allocation to those resource centres? I apologise for not being able to find a line item.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: If I help the member for Mandurah, maybe he can help me and then I could also direct the director general to answer some of the question. I refer the member to the third dot point on page 795 of the *Budget Statements* that begins with "Support for parenting". The last sentence of that paragraph states —

The Department provides a state-wide information help line supplemented by voluntary programs for parents who are experiencing difficulties.

Would that perhaps —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am not trying to be difficult, but this division has a number of parts, including seniors, volunteers and women's interests. The paragraph the minister referred to is a program that supports parents. I understand that the state used to fund, and still should be funding—previously through the Department for Community Development and now through the Department for Communities—14 volunteer resource centres throughout the state, including one in the minister's electorate, in Esperance. My concern is that there is no reference in the budget papers to volunteering programs in a broader sense. The minister mentioned a parenting program, but I am talking about volunteering in a broader sense. Where in the budget papers can I be directed to an indication of what is being funded in the volunteer sector, be it funding to Volunteering WA, the volunteer resource centres, a school volunteer program, or anything of that nature? I am concerned because that does not appear in the budget papers, which makes it difficult for me to ask the minister a question.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Technically, the member for Mandurah cannot ask a question if there is no reference to it in the budget papers. In fact, I looked for and saw the words "voluntary program" and thought that, with the Chairman's direction, it would allow the member, with some licence, to ask a question concerning that. I direct the member to another reference on page 797 under the heading "Strategic Policy and Coordination". The efficiency indicator on the fourth line from the bottom of the table shows the average cost of a strategic policy/coordination project for volunteers. Maybe the member could frame the question around that point.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Can someone tell me what amount of money, through the Department for Communities, is allocated to volunteering? Specifically, what funding does the Department for Communities provide to the 14—I think that is the correct number—community volunteer resource centres? My recollection is that the funding varied between \$10 000 and \$15 000 per centre, although I am not sure. I have no way of knowing that given the budget papers that have been presented to us. That is a failing, but not of the minister, because I love him—I do not love him; I respect him deeply! It is a failing of how this particular division has

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been presented to us. It makes our job very difficult. It is an area of interest that I hold very dear. It is a very important issue.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: For the average cost of strategic policy and coordination for volunteers, reference is made in the 2009-10 budget to \$105 349 per project. I might receive some further information. For supplies and services, communities and volunteering, \$812 825 has been provided for non-government agencies —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Where does that appear?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: —for volunteer resource centres. It is under supplies and services.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I do not wish to take up further time of the committee. Perhaps the minister can provide to me as supplementary information the allocation provided, through the Department for Communities, for specifically the volunteering component and, in particular, the funding that the Department for Communities provides to the various volunteer resource centres in Western Australia.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Due to the complexity of that question and the fact that the member has not given us a line item in the budget papers to do that—I have tried to assist in that area—would he accept asking that question on notice?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: As long as I get an answer.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I can guarantee that the member will get an answer.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the member for Mandurah realise that he must go through the normal channels to put a question on notice?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes. I now refer to the minister's comments earlier regarding seniors. The fourth dot point on page 795 states that nearly one in three Western Australians will be a senior by 2041. What is the department's definition of "senior"? What research is being done by the department to look at the overall cost in future budgets of the provision of services to seniors, including the services mentioned under significant issues and trends? If one in three Western Australians will be a senior and a significant number of those will be eligible for the various rebates and concessions that are being provided, what research is being done on the overall cost of that to the state in the future?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: My advice is that I will be a senior very soon. The age at which someone is defined as a senior is 60 years or older. I know that I do not look 60 years old, but I am nearly there. I do not want to make light of this. Perhaps I can refer the question to the director general and she can talk about some of the specifics about the demographics.

[9.30 pm]

Ms S. Barrera: As the minister said, a senior is a person defined as 60 years or older. Because we administer the Seniors Card, it is incumbent upon us to monitor very carefully the costs associated with the Seniors Card. In conjunction with other departments, we monitor the concessions available under the Seniors Card and attempt to project into the future the impost on the state of maintaining the Seniors Card for the foreseeable future. That work is done and updated as we get more precise information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Would we be talking about a major projection of increased costs if we maintained concessions at their current rate, and/or added to them into the future?

Ms S. Barrera: That is proportional to the increase in the number of seniors, so obviously the increase in the cost of concessions will occur.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I refer to the line item on page 793, under "Election Commitments", for the seniors' security rebate. Can the minister please explain when the government will announce details of this safety and security rebate, and when will seniors be able to claim this rebate?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: The seniors' security rebate is—I am sorry to use this term for the third time this evening—a work in progress. However, as the member can see, the budget paper shows a line item for expenditure in 2009-10 of \$5 million, and \$2.5 million in each of the two out years, making a total commitment of \$10 million. The government's priority has been to get the cost-of-living rebate payment, which we have talked about previously tonight, into seniors' bank accounts, and that is what we have done. However, we have been working hard on the development of the safety and security rebate scheme, and the minister intends to announce the scheme in July and will provide details then. I have just a little more detail about that scheme. As I said, the government is finalising the work on scoping the options. The safety and security rebate will be delivered in the coming financial year. Seniors' Card holders will be eligible for rebates of up to \$200 on a range of household security items. The details of the scheme will be made available when it is announced, as I said. The budget allocation is \$10 million. The number of senior households is estimated to be around 200 000. If all households applied for the full rebate, the cost of the scheme would be approximately \$40 million. Therefore, the proposed model limits

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the number of items claimable to six, with designated amounts per item. The claimable rebate for a security screen door will be \$100, regardless of the purchase cost. The rebate will be to a maximum of \$200, dependent on the item, and not a flat \$200 payment. As I said, the minister will make an announcement recommending July 2009 as the starting date, with rebates payable from 1 October this year. The Department for Communities will consult with the relevant stakeholders, such as the hardware and security industries, to ensure that suppliers are prepared for a possible increase in demand.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: I refer to the second dot point on page 795 of the *Budget Statements*, which relates to child care. We all know that the child care industry is under severe pressure at the moment. Can the minister explain why he is introducing fees from 1 January of \$350 for all types of providers, including family day care, long day care and out-of-school care, plus another \$15 for every place above 30 places for all childcare centres, plus an additional \$15 for every place above 90 places for out-of-school care? Can the minister tell us what modelling he did to determine the impact on long day care, family day care and out-of-school care, and also what modelling he did to determine the impact on rural and remote childcare providers in each of those categories? Is it not just another tax?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: This could be a longish answer, and members should not misconstrue it as a ministerial statement, but I think it is very important to explore the issues of childcare fees. The member for Joondalup was intimating that this is a tax on the industry. It is important to recognise that there is an argument that the principal activities associated with the issue of childcare licences should attract a fee for service, as occurs with other businesses related to licences issued under Western Australian legislation. A licence associated with the operation of a childcare service is in effect a business licence. Childcare services are currently the only small business type in Western Australia that does not attract a business licensing fee, although they are subject to a range of business-related fees and charges. We do not necessarily have to follow other jurisdictions. Tasmania, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory currently charge no fees to obtain a licence, but it has recently been announced that there will be a licence fee for childcare services in New South Wales beginning next year. If that can be accepted, there is an issue of administering an agency, a childcare services act, the related regulations, and the childcare licensing standards. The Department for Communities is responsible for the management of that licensing process and for advising childcare services on regulatory matters, and carrying out compliance and enforcement actions required under the act. Without sounding too bureaucratic, I hope that the member can understand that there is an argument for licensing. I will go through some of the licence fees that the member delineated in some of those categories. It is important to say that in Western Australia there are 1 492 licensed care services, of which 560 are childcare centres, 698 are family day care services and 234 are outside school hours care. The typical childcare service in Perth, for instance, is subject to regulatory and licensing requirements that involve as many as 12 agencies across federal, state and local government, and require as many as 19 different licensing and registration actions.

Getting to the nub of this is the impact on families and the suggestion by the member that it is a significant impost. It is anticipated that the licence cost will be passed on to families through the service budget, and thereby imposing some childcare increases. The size of the impact will depend on the size of the service. However, for a parent using, say, an 80-place childcare service, the impact of that will be \$4.58 per child per year; a parent using a family day care service, \$16 per child per year; and for a parent using a 45-place out-of-school service, out of school hours, \$2.59 per child per year. I think the member for Joondalup talked about a regional impact. In the regions WA has a small cohort of childcare services. I know that, coming from a rural centre in the town of Esperance. The rural services do provide community support. There are 75 childcare services with fewer than 30 places. Mandurah, Meadow Springs, Wundowie and Christmas Island have been excluded for the purpose of the exercise I am talking about. Of those services 34, or 45 per cent of them, operate for fewer than five days, and 41, or 55 per cent, operate from Monday to Friday. Most of the services that operate for fewer than five days operate all day on the days they are open. There is a list of towns that have a single childcare service.

[9.40 pm]

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: What has the minister done to determine the impact on people? Has he done any modelling on the industry to determine the impacts?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I gave the member some figures about the impacts in dollars per child per year.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: What will be the impact on the family day care centres that are closing down? They are already under huge stress. In my electorate of Joondalup they are under huge stress and many of the owners are walking away from the industry because of that stress, yet the government is seeking to add further stress. They will not put up their prices because they see it as adding stress to the families they are delivering the services to, so this is another impost on top of the government's electricity, water and other charges. The \$3.54 the Treasurer laid out in the budget was misleading the house; it is quite significantly more than that.

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Dr G.G. JACOBS: I think I have been through some of the points about the rationale behind the licensing fee and the regime. However, for services coming under those acts and regulations, a licensing fee will be a base fee of \$350.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: The rationale is basically that the government is grabbing more money from the people who are least able to afford it. That is fine; my question is answered.

The CHAIRMAN: The minister is saying that it is a base amount, so he is saying that that amount can increase over time. Is it cost recoverable or is it a tax?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: It is a base fee of \$350 and \$15 for each place over 30 places. For the out-of-school care the licensing fee will be a base fee of \$350, and then \$15 per place for each place above 90 places. There will be a fairly high number of places before that \$15 kicks in. The typical out-of-school-hours care operates at one-third the hours of a typical childcare centre. This per-place offer will therefore be set so that the out-of-school-hours care will not pay the excess fee until the 90 places kick in, providing equity with the other childcare service types.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it cost recoverable?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: The advice I have is that it costs the department more than that in administration.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: Can the minister tell us what consultation he undertook with the industry and parent groups prior to the announcement or did he just spring this on them? We know he sprang it on them because he sprang it on us.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I have gone through some of the rationale. Perhaps, the director general may like to address some of the issues of consultation if she wishes and if she can. If not, we will take that as a political statement.

Ms S. Barrera: They were introduced as part of the budget process; therefore, we were not at liberty to discuss them outside government agencies.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: So parents and childcare providers had no idea this was coming?

Ms S. Barrera: Unfortunately not.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to page 794 and to the three per cent efficiency dividend and reductions in the non-government sector payments of \$305 000, \$316 000, \$327 000 and \$348 000. Can the minister give me the detail for that?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I thank the member for her patience. In relation to the reduction in non-government sector payments under the three per cent efficiency dividend, the Department of Treasury and Finance directed the Department for Communities to enforce a three per cent efficiency dividend, including funding to the non-government sector but excluding grants. The contractual service agreements are in place for all the 205 funded services, the majority of which expire either at the end of September 2009 or September 2010. All these contractual arrangements will be honoured. In April 2009, the Department for Communities commenced a group review of all funded services. The review is focusing on current and future community needs and identifying efficiencies that could be secured in relation to non-government funding. Again, it is not ideal but, to be frank, we have some stringencies in the economic climate in which we find ourselves, and we hope that that has minor or insignificant impacts in the long term.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I am a bit concerned, because the first dot point under "Significant Issues Impacting the Agency" on page 795 clearly states that the demand for community services is rapidly growing, and non-government agencies are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the demand already. The minister has just told me that the government is taking three per cent across the board off all the NGO contracts, not the grants, when they come up for renewal again. What will the government do with the people who need help?

[9.50 pm]

Dr G.G. JACOBS: It is important to note under that dot point that the Department for Communities provides annual funding of \$16.4 million to non-government organisations to provide a range of community services, including child care, parenting, and family and community support for seniors, children, young people and redress applicants. It provides funding to over 200 services across the metropolitan area and rural Western Australia. The department also provides \$4.3 million in one-off grants—I have said that the efficiency dividend excluded grants—to non-government organisations to implement a range of programs and activities for families, seniors, children, volunteers and carers. The Department for Communities provides annual funding of \$1.3 million to peak community organisations, including the Western Australian Council of Social Service, the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, Volunteering WA, Community Link and Network—CLAN WA Inc—Playgroup WA, Learning Centre Link and the Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre Inc, for support and

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the development of services. I advise the member for Maylands that it is not an ideal world and sometimes there are stringencies, but there is enough evidence to show that we are trying to provide resources for these ongoing programs.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I understand that. I have a further question. The non-government sector has provided the department with very good evidence about a 30 per cent under-resourcing that it is currently experiencing. This information has been presented to the department through joint working groups, committees, social inclusion strategies and so on over the past few years. The minister is telling me that not only is the department not putting any more money into delivering contracted services when services are already turning away one in every three clients that comes to them for help, but also the government is taking out three per cent in addition to what they are already suffering. Effectively, they will be 33 per cent underfunded to deliver the government's contracts. Is that what the minister is saying?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I have provided enough evidence of that funding outside the three per cent efficiency dividend reductions to make a case that there is support in dollar terms for those programs I previously listed.

Ms L.L. BAKER: It is not enough. My further question is that the government is talking about staffing efficiencies in the three per cent efficiency dividend. Which positions do they relate to?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I suppose I could bring that under staffing economies.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I said "efficiencies", but the minister should go ahead.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: Which jobs are being cut?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Before I refer to the specifics of the jobs, which I do not have in my head, member for Joondalup, the staffing economies are to be achieved through rigorous scrutiny of whether vacant positions need to be filled or whether functions and duties could be re-allocated to other staff. It happens in not only this department, but also lots of departments. It is in fact occurring in my portfolios. The additional workload on the remaining staff is actively managed to avoid overloads. We are trying to do the best we can with what we have to avoid overload and a drop in service standards. As to the specifics, if she can and if she would like, maybe the director general will give some detail on the specifics of staffing.

Ms S. Barrera: Obviously the department must live within its budget. Reducing staff is the least desirable way to achieve that. We will be examining very carefully all our discretionary expenditure, including expenditure on consumables, vehicles and anything else over which we can exercise some control and reduce expenditure. However, an examination of our budget and our current staffing situation unfortunately demonstrates that we will not be able to fill all vacant positions. Nevertheless we will honour all the industrial relations contracts that we have in place so that staff who are permanent public servants retain those rights. We will be working within the constraints of vacancies that occur and the willingness of staff to adjust and be flexible to try to maintain our services to the best of our ability, both in quantity and quality, but also achieve our budget constraints.

Ms L.L. BAKER: In relation to the cuts, efficiencies or whatever and the reorganisation of consultative mechanisms that the minister is undertaking, my concern is for the Office of Women's Policy. We have already mentioned the Indigenous Women's Council. There are other advisory mechanisms within there. In fact, it is one of the strongest advisory contacts that this government inherited. It is of great concern to me that two major women's consultative structures are in danger of being rationalised, changed or done away with altogether and that the Office of Women's Policy grants, which were incredibly useful grants and which the office was giving to the community, might also be cut. Can the minister reassure me that that will not happen? It would make me very happy.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I would love to make the member for Maylands happy. In my briefings on the budget process for the Department for Communities the director general directed my attention to the second last dot point on page 795, which states —

The global financial crisis, poverty traps, limited superannuation and minimal savings disproportionately impact on women.

The director general is very conscious of that. I am now very conscious of that, having had it drawn to my attention. The second last dot point continues —

The Department coordinates policies and programs to address these issues and provide support for women in these circumstances.

I will ask the director general to flesh that out a little to give the member that assurance.

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Ms S. Barrera: The question related particularly to the consultative mechanisms and WAMWA and the Indigenous Women's Congress. I can only reiterate that the consultative mechanisms are currently under consideration by the minister and she will be making a decision about it and an announcement when she has concluded her deliberations.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to the Office of Women's Policy grants—the small grants program that was used to fund community projects.

Ms S. Barrera: The grants programs are also being reviewed. I am advised that there were two separate grants programs. They will have to go into the mix. The grants programs, as we mentioned before, are not being reduced at this point in time. We anticipate that we will proceed as normal.

Ms L.L. BAKER: My final question refers to the item pertaining to economic audit in the same section. There is mention of a rationalisation of the structure. Would the minister explain what that is? It is a significant amount of money. This department is well known for being dramatically underfunded, which is not necessarily the minister's fault. It would be nice to know what the rationalisation in the structure will be.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I thank the member for the question. To be quite frank with the member, anything under the economic audit section involves the Economic and Expenditure Review Committee. I know, because I have been there with my portfolios. Recognising the financial stringencies that are upon us, the Economic and Expenditure Reform Committee indicated that there would be a reduction in policy officer staff overhead structures in 2009-10. The reduction will be applied to four policy areas that were brought together to form the Department for Communities, excluding the Office of Multicultural Interests, and savings would be realised through the reorganisation and rationalisation of the management structure of the policy and planning division. I suppose, in short, that means to do better.

The CHAIRMAN: The time for this division has expired.

The appropriation was recommended.

Committee adjourned at 10.00 pm
