

Chair; Mrs Alyssa Hayden; Ms Simone McGurk; Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Shane Love; Amber-Jade Sanderson;
Mrs Lisa O'Malley; Ms Cassandra Rowe

Division 33: Communities — Services 1 to 6, Child Protection; Women's Interests; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services, \$818 043 000 —

Mr T.J. Healy, Chair.

Ms S.F. McGurk, Minister for Child Protection.

Ms M.J. Andrews, Director General.

Mr P.S. Isaachsen, Deputy Director General, Strategy and Transformation.

Mrs J. Tang, Assistant Director General, Service Delivery, Metropolitan Communities.

Mrs R. Green, Assistant Director General, Service Delivery, Regional and Remote.

Ms H. Nys, Assistant Director General, Policy and Service Design.

Mr B.P. Jolly, Acting Assistant Director General, Commissioning and Sector Engagement.

Mr L. Carren, Executive Director, Finance and Business Services; Chief Finance Officer.

Mr M. Richardson, Director, Management, Accounting and Financial Analysis.

Mr D. Settelmaier, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available the following day. It is the intention of the Chair 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 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. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item, program or amount in the current division. Members should give these details in preface to their question. If a division or service is the responsibility of more than one minister, a minister shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

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. I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information she 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 principal clerk by Friday, 31 May 2019. 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 through the online questions system.

I give the call to the member for Darling Range.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I refer to page 443 of budget paper No 2. I appreciate that the structure of the Department of Communities covers a lot of different portfolios, and a few of the advisers have been asked this question under a different section, but I would appreciate an explanation under the broader Department of Communities. In the appropriations, expenses and cash assets table, I note that the total appropriations line item delivers a 2018–19 estimated actual that is \$15 million less than what was budgeted for. Can I get an explanation of what that \$15 million drop has meant to the Department of Communities, and what services or staff or wages have been reduced because of it?

Ms S.F. McGURK: My advice is that this decrease does not relate to anything in my portfolio responsibilities, but is connected with the transitioning of Western Australia to the National Disability Insurance Scheme, which is nationally delivered. That has reduced state funding for administration costs and grants expended in 2020–21.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: By way of clarification, the \$15 million drop has nothing to do with any community services, only the NDIS transition.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am just receiving advice on that. On pages 443 and 444 of budget paper No 2, there is a summary of spending changes under this budget. That outlines quite clearly the different components of the department's spending.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The total appropriation on page 443 is reduced to \$1.708 billion in 2018–19, and then it goes up again to \$1.805 billion in 2019–20. Can the minister explain what that increase is for? Is it in her community services?

Ms S.F. McGURK: So that I can be clear, the member is back onto the total appropriations on page 443, and she is talking about the budget estimate, and what is occurring in the forward estimates?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Yes. We have just had a \$15 million drop from the estimated actual in 2018–19, but in 2019–20 it is going up to \$1.805 billion. Can the minister explain what the additional funds are being used for?

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Ms S.F. McGURK: The advice I am getting from the department's chief finance officer is that any variations outlined in the summary that the member just gave us are detailed under spending changes on pages 443 and 444. A table there gives quite specific items relating to all the different portfolios that fall under the Department of Communities. When they do not have a specific allocation, they are included under "Other" on page 444.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: As the minister alluded to, the forward estimate also declines between 2020 and 2023. She is going to refer me to the table on page 444. I note in that table that there is no allocation for community and neighbourhood development funding in the forward estimates for 2021–22 and 2022–23. Can the minister explain why there is no funding for that?

Ms S.F. McGURK: Yes, I can. The member is now on page 444, talking about the line item "Community and Neighbourhood Development Funding". That is the additional funding that is being put into what were previously the neighbourhood development centres, but which are now called empowering communities grants. Over \$60 million is put into those services across Communities, but this is actually just the increase in funding for those services. The amount is \$2 million—that is, \$1 million in 2019–20 and \$1 million plus indexation in 2020–21. It is just the additional money put into that program, not the total money.

[2.10 pm]

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: On the empowering communities program, which replaced the old family neighbourhood centres, a number of centres did not receive funding and I know the department has been working with them. Is that included in that funding; and will those centres' funding be secured and locked away? As the minister knows, they have been a little stressed out because they have been in uncertainty. I would be interested to know whether the funding allocated to them is secure and whether they will get another five-year contract agreement.

Ms S.F. McGURK: The line item the member referred to on page 444 of the *Budget Statements*, "Community and Neighbourhood Development Funding", reflects the approach to funding these community centres, which we have been very clear about. We followed the previous government's intention and went out to tender for those organisations. I understand that it caused some angst. It took longer because we consulted all the centres to involve them in establishing the tender criteria. I got good feedback that community organisations felt they had been included in identifying the funding criteria. However, when the tender process was finalised, some centres were not successful in getting funding. This extra money reflects a commitment by our government to provide transition funding for the organisations that were not successful in the original tender to help them work with the department to see whether they can meet the tender criteria, which were jointly established by the department and those organisations.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Is the minister able to advise where the department is up to in the process with those centres that were not funded and that the department is working with, and how close the department is to determining their ongoing funding and making them secure?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I do not have any updates to give about individual centres. I understand there has been positive interaction with a number of the centres. I note that the member for Vasse is here. The People Place Busselton is one of the centres that was affected. We are working with a number of other centres in Collie and Newman, for example. If they are doing work in the centres that could meet the criteria outlined in the tender process, we want to ensure they are able to meet the requirements for ongoing funding under this program.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Does the minister have a time frame? Is the department expecting it to be done by the midyear review or by December? It is a long time for the centres and these people do not know whether they have a future.

Ms S.F. McGURK: We have an obligation to ensure that when we award public money to any community organisation, we do so with probity and an understanding of proper process. We have an obligation to do that when we spend public money. As I said, the tender criteria were set up jointly with those community organisations. I understand that there has been quite good progress, but I do not know that we are in a position to give a specific time frame for an outcome to those discussions. I am happy to ask Brad Jolly whether he could give the member an update on that.

Mr B.P. Jolly: I thank the member for the question. I will briefly recap some of the points that the minister has made. A number of previous providers in the CNDS—community and neighbourhood development services—were not successful in transitioning to the empowering communities program. Once the tender evaluation process was finalised, some gaps in service delivery were identified, particularly in five locations, and the minister has referred to some of those. They were Collie, Karratha, Newman, Kalgoorlie and Busselton, which the minister has referred to. There is a dedicated piece of work that is focused on working with the providers in the CNDS program in each of those locations to help them transition to the new empowering communities program. As the minister mentioned, that work has already kicked off with The People Place Busselton. Fingers crossed, that will be the first of the services that will make that transition into the empowering communities program. We will progressively work with each of the services that I have just mentioned over the next six months. A number of other services

were unsuccessful; these are mainly focused on delivery of early years services. The funding of those services will be continued under the CNDS program until June 2021. During that time, we will evaluate the role that those services play in relation to the strategies coming out of the government's bright futures initiative. That work will be ongoing over the next 12 to 18 months.

Ms L. METTAM: I would like to clarify. Will part of those funds that have been set aside in 2019–20 and 2020–21 be dedicated to ensuring and supporting the other The People Place centres? Will the department be working with those five centres to ensure that they meet the required targets?

Ms S.F. McGURK: That is right.

Ms L. METTAM: The feedback I received was that one of the great concerns raised throughout this process was that the location of the centres was not considered as part of the criteria when centres were selected for funding. Has that been reviewed? Is there now a different approach to how government funds these empowering communities centres?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I contest that location was not a consideration in the allocation. There were some districts in which all the services were considered. As I said, the establishment of the criteria was undertaken over a period in consultation with the sector. I will hand over to Brad Jolly to address that specific question.

Mr B.P. Jolly: That is certainly the case. The program was developed through a consultative process with the existing CNDS providers. The tender evaluation criteria that were applied did not specifically reference location. Although, as the minister mentioned, there was consideration of location in terms of the funding allocation across districts as part of the overall tender package, location was considered after the evaluation of the tenders. We looked at the service delivery that was being provided by the successful providers and identified whether there were geographical gaps in service delivery. From that process, we identified the five locations that were referred to earlier. That is why we are working with the providers in those locations to ensure complete geographic coverage across those areas where CNDS had previously been provided.

[2.20 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: To add to that answer, I wish to make it clear that location was very much a consideration in the allocation. It might not have been a specific criterion, although districts were. Essentially, if services did not meet the tender criteria, it would not be right for the government to award them a successful tender, and we would be open to criticism if we did. We understand that that caused some angst for those organisations that are currently operating that did not meet the selection criteria, particularly when, as a result of that decision, they left a gap. Busselton is a good example of that. People said that when we did provide services and award a contract, they were too far away. We understand that and that is the reason we have awarded additional money to work with those organisations to see whether they can either better reflect their application process to meet the tender criteria according to what they are doing now, or make some adjustments to what they are doing so that they meet the tender criteria and continue to operate as a service.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to “Works in Progress” on page 456 and to the line item “West Pilbara Plan—Roebourne Refurbishments”. I further refer to page 447 and service provisions 5 and 6, listed as requiring approval. I note that on page 448 there are some outcomes and key effectiveness indicators for areas 5 and 6. Under the outcome “Children and young people needing protection are safe from abuse and harm” it lists some indicators of success or otherwise. Is there a separate indicator of success of the west Pilbara plan, and how has that been measured? What are the results thus far? What parameters is the minister hoping to achieve, or are there any actual indicators for success in the west Pilbara?

Ms S.F. McGURK: As the member said, the outcomes and key effectiveness indicators are clearly outlined in a number of pages. They do not refer to specific programs or geographical areas. They are broad areas that the department is involved in and will often align with some of our national reporting requirements relating to child protection work, working with vulnerable families, working with children checks and the like.

In relation to the west Pilbara plan, we had a very specific outline of initiatives that we would put in place. Some of them were immediate works in the short and medium term. Others involved working with the community on some quite fundamental issues relating to how that community was working, and would take time to implement. There were a number of priorities for the west Pilbara plan, including more support for children, carers and families; a safer community for children; tackling alcohol and drugs; engagement in school and work; healing the community; and reprioritising government contracts and services. As with much of our work, it was a challenge to provide this response within existing budgets through a redesign of service delivery and, importantly, greater coordination across government agencies.

In terms of our work in 2018–19, we have included supporting the establishment of the 6718 leadership group, which is intended to be an enduring forum in which we can work with the residents to identify opportunities for change and improvement in the community.

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As an example of some of the specific change that we put in place, we committed to 10 supported households in the Roebourne area. These would not be boarding houses or group houses for children to be serviced by staff; they would be existing normal households that were operating well but would be given additional support. Elders in the community—older women—were saying that a number of young people and children come to them needing a quiet place—a place to eat, a place of refuge, if you like. They were happy to do that, but they were struggling to provide that sort of support in their existing houses. We agreed to have 10 supported households, so we would move those people to larger houses and give them some additional support. That work has progressed quite well. That is an example of specific action that we committed to that is now being implemented.

Mr R.S. LOVE: When the minister says that the work has been progressed, at what stage is the trial? Can the minister identify any households in Roebourne that have already been established as safe houses? If it is not 10, how many is it?

Ms S.F. McGURK: Nine out of the 10 houses have been allocated to Roebourne families. Six families have moved in and are occupying the refurbished houses, and are connected to support services. We will continue to work with them over time.

It is important to understand that there is no specific list of initiatives in the west Pilbara plan that we will announce, implement and walk away from in Roebourne. It is a process of working with the community, understanding their priorities and being willing to adjust the way we do work in the government upon listening to the community. That is something that we have endeavoured to make our hallmark in our approach to some of the very challenging social situations that are occurring in regional Western Australia, particularly with Aboriginal communities.

Another example is that the community said it wanted a residential healing facility near Roebourne. A co-design process is being co-funded with the state government and also Woodside and Rio Tinto through a company called j-HUB Indigenous Co-Design, which is working with the community to see what a residential healing facility just out of town would look like. That is taking a bit of time to do, but it is great to see some of the resource companies coming on.

Mr R.S. LOVE: What was that facility that was being set up? I could not hear because of the noise.

Ms S.F. McGURK: It is a residential healing facility just outside of Roebourne. That is one of the things that the community asked for. It is being progressed in a project that has been jointly funded by the state government, Woodside and Rio Tinto. Time is being taken to co-design that residential healing facility with the local community. The feasibility work is being done now, and we will receive that report and see how it looks.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Is this facility the men's shelter that was discussed when the minister first announced a package of investment and government action in Roebourne? Under the west Pilbara plan in 2018, the minister announced that a men's shelter would be set up in Roebourne to allow women and children experiencing domestic violence to stay in their home. Has that shelter been developed?

Ms S.F. McGURK: It may be included in the residential facility. That might be something that is considered in the planning for the residential healing centre. In fact, I have just been advised that it would be separate from that. We often talk about perpetrator interventions or perpetrator programs when we talk about men's programs in some of those centres, and that is something that we continue to look at to ensure that there is an appropriate facility—either a perpetrator program or a place where men can go and feel supported in their area.

I should also say that there have been some other initiatives. The Roebourne Police and Community Youth Centre will be supported. The idea of a youth hub where we continue to focus on activities for young people in the area is being prioritised.

[2.30 pm]

Mr R.S. LOVE: When the announcements were made in February 2018, the Roebourne men's shelter was announced separately from the residential facility. Looking at the west Pilbara plan investment, which is on page 456 of the *Budget Statements*, it appears there is a budgeted amount of only \$30 000 this year and \$2 000 going forward. Where is the money for the Roebourne men's shelter in the budget?

Ms S.F. McGURK: As the member will be aware, a common theme of our government—I apologise for my voice—is that we said when we were elected that not only would we implement our election commitments and prioritise jobs in Western Australia, but we would have a discipline of budget repair. When we announced the west Pilbara plan, no new money was associated with that plan. We said we would do this work with existing resources. Finding an appropriate organisation to run a men's facility in Roebourne has been challenging. The extra money listed on page 456 that the member referred to is simply an additional contribution to some capital spending in Roebourne. The challenge always with some of the social service work that is needed throughout the state is that it can be very expensive and require recurrent funding. It has not been just a funding consideration, though. Again, as we have been looking across the state at perpetrator programs or, in fact, men's programs generally, a challenge

is to find evidence-based programs that are effective, particularly for Aboriginal committees. We fund a peak body called Stopping Family Violence, which is a body in Western Australia that looks at programs for men perpetrating domestic violence. It looks at best practice in that work, making sure that good evidence-based programs are available for organisations that want to do that work in Western Australia. We try to put the framework in place so that when we are able to fund services, or there are services that already do that work, they have proper guidelines to do it effectively. A challenge across the country, frankly, is to not only work with perpetrators and have good practice in that work, but also take the time to work with Aboriginal communities—notwithstanding the urgency and seriousness of the matter—to understand what the culturally appropriate services would be and how we can embed the capacity of the community to help do some of this work.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Is the minister confirming that the Roebourne men's shelter will now not be built and is shelved because no money is allocated to its development? Is she saying that she is reassessing the appropriateness of whether that was the best way to have an intervention program? Is the minister saying the project has been shelved altogether?

Ms S.F. McGURK: No, I am not saying that at all. I am saying that when we announced the west Pilbara plan, we never committed to putting new money into the plan. We have been working within existing resources and making sure that we were looking critically at the services and the spend in Roebourne and around the west Pilbara so that there was an effective allocation of government money. The issues around the men's shelter or work with men in the area are challenging across the state. We are trying to make sure that if we decide to fund an organisation to do that work in Roebourne or anywhere else, it will do that work effectively. That is a work in progress, quite frankly. It is a difficult area of work across the state and across the country. It is something about Western Australia that I raised with my equivalent women's safety ministers from other states and the federal ministers when we last met in Adelaide last year.

Mr R.S. LOVE: When this plan was launched, there was an acknowledgement that 224 children had been identified as victims of abuse in the west Pilbara at that point. If that is not enough of a priority for the government to develop the Roebourne men's shelter, what is?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I do not know how closely the member has been following this story, but the Department of Communities never gave that figure of 224 victims. There were larger numbers, such as the number the member just gave, of suspected and possible victims within the west Pilbara and the broader Roebourne area. In fact, child safety in Roebourne or, indeed, across the state is not a matter of finding a certain number of cases, solving them, locking the perpetrators up and walking away from the community. That is not the case; it is an ongoing piece of work. The original police operation, Operation Fledermaus, has ceased. It was replaced by the west Pilbara plan, and that has also now ceased as a police operation. However, there is ongoing work, with cooperation between police and child protection officers. Of course, we understand the seriousness of antisocial behaviour, the extent of family violence and the cases of child sex abuse that were occurring in the west Pilbara and we understand it is an issue across many communities—unfortunately, it is very sad to say—across the state.

When we announced our response in the west Pilbara plan, we had some specific initiatives. One of the cornerstones of the approach we are taking is to work with the community to understand its needs and approaches. To give the example of the Aboriginal healing centre, the community said it is something it wanted. We have partnerships with two big resource companies, which, to their credit, have agreed to fund a feasibility study and look closely at how this residential healing centre might work. Of course, I would like there to be an effective men's healing centre as well, a men's program, in Roebourne, but we need to find something effective that will work in the town, because I am not prepared to ask my department or Treasury for additional money unless I know it will be effectively spent. There is a dearth of effective men's and perpetrators' programs throughout the state and the country, and I could talk at length about that. As I said before, we are funding a peak body that is doing good work, not only in trying to build the capacity of existing organisations, but also in looking at best practice around the country and the world in working with men who are perpetrators. I think that is a good investment for us in WA. It is doing work, from what I have seen in other states, that is recognised as being significant nationally. That is good work. In the meantime, we will continue, where we can, to support perpetrator work or men's behavioural change work. Of course, in our election commitments and in the last budget, we funded an additional residential perpetrator program, which was Breathing Space. Men throughout the state can come down and participate in those residential programs.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Going back to the key effectiveness indicators listed on page 440 of the *Budget Statements*, when the government developed the west Pilbara plan, did it put in place any key indicators of the success or otherwise of the west Pilbara plan? Are there any identifiable aspirations for that plan that could be measured, and how is the measurement of the plan progressing thus far?

[2.40 pm]

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Ms S.F. McGURK: As I said, the key indicators are set by the department and I am happy to see whether any of my department representatives here want to talk about the process in which those measures are identified and the targets arrived at. We take our commitments that we gave about the west Pilbara plan prior to and since the election seriously, and we will be held to account publicly for how we implement that plan. I meet regularly with people in the department to see how the progress of the specific initiatives of the plan is going. Since the announcement of that plan, I have been to Roebourne a number of times to continue to communicate with the local community. I think anyone who has lived in Western Australia for a while knows that this is a challenging community; it has some great strengths, but it also has some challenges that have been, essentially, inherited through a number of government policies over the years that are now manifest in the community. We are trying to get on and support the good work and existing institutions in Roebourne, whether it is education, health, police work or the police and community youth centres, and working with the elders to make sure that the households that are going well are supported. A number of households have agreed to have alcohol prohibition orders placed on them. That is a step forward. We are trialling the banned drinkers register that will affect that area as well. We are moving on a number of fronts. The nature of some of this work is that it will not be so straightforward that we can tick a box and say that we have implemented change in the community and can walk away. That is not an approach that I want to take.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I thought that the minister was going to outline some of those indicators to me, but she has not.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will ask my director general to address that question.

Ms M.J. Andrews: Just to expand on what the minister was outlining, from the public sector's point of view, I have a very strong recollection of the challenge that the government, the Premier and the minister put to the public sector around this issue in 2017. It was very much framed as: "If this is not your core business, what is?" That was a very reasonable challenge at the time. It really spoke to the broader public sector reform agenda that had been initiated, firstly through the machinery-of-government changes, and then the wider reform program that we are still progressing. It is about working differently, particularly around these really challenging problems we face across our state. With that challenge in mind, solutions are not going to be found by just throwing more money at it. Directors general at the time were asked to think differently about how we worked. Going to the point that the member is asking about, which is really what the key performance indicators are, all the principles that the minister has outlined—that one about working differently with the community itself—are important when we start saying, "What does success look like? How are we going to measure it?" For us to come in and impose that on the community would be walking away from the principles that inform how we are looking to work differently with the community. We are seeing that play out more widely, nationally, in the discussion around closing the gap and in setting targets and outcomes in that process as well, with Aboriginal leaders demanding to work differently and in partnership. Those same principles have applied around the west Pilbara plan. We certainly see it as part of a plan going forward. We want to work with the community on exactly that, but those things are going to take time.

Ms L. METTAM: Regarding the west Pilbara plan and specifically Roebourne refurbishments, what refurbishments have been completed in 2018–19 and are planned for 2019–20 and 2020–21?

Ms S.F. McGURK: Can I have a page number for that?

Ms L. METTAM: Page 456.

Ms S.F. McGURK: We committed to refurbishing 10 houses, as I referred to in a previous answer. Nine of those 10 houses have been allocated to Roebourne families. All those houses have been refurbished, and six of those nine families have moved in and have been connected to support services. We did not just say that we would give them a large house if they needed it; we said we would also make sure that there was additional support, in many cases, for elders who are looking after a number of children in the area. The commencements of other families moving in are expected in coming weeks.

Ms L. METTAM: And for 2019–20 and 2020–21?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I might hand over to Paul Isaachsen for this question, but we committed to refurbish those houses.

Ms L. METTAM: We can take it as supplementary information if the minister would like.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am saying that in the west Pilbara plan we committed to refurbish 10 houses and that is what we have done. I have just outlined to the member that we have refurbished those 10 houses, we have moved six of those families in, and nine of those houses have been allocated. The capital work has been done.

Ms L. METTAM: To clarify, what is the funding in the forward estimates for? Is that to assist with the completion of the refurbishments?

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Ms S.F. McGURK: I am not sure that we would get very far with the \$30 000 on capital spend in the Pilbara. I understand it is just the tail end of the additional allocation. I am looking at page 356 under “West Pilbara Plan—Roebourne Refurbishments”. The member can see that there was a tail end of spending that might be required just to finalise those houses, but no additional funds are required.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Is the minister able to advise whether the refurbishments in Roebourne will assist the children who have been identified as victims of child sex abuse? Are they now able to live in a residence where they will not have a perpetrator in their house? Will these refurbishments assist with that?

Ms S.F. McGURK: The idea about the strong households, as they were called, was that they would be existing households where children in the community were already spending time, either because they were related to the people who were running those households, or they felt safe in those households. I would be concerned to hear that there are children who are at risk of being exposed to sex abuse as a virtue of where they are living. If there is concern about that, then I would expect child protection officers and police in Roebourne to respond to it. These households were not put in place as an alternative to addressing concerns about child safety in existing households. I would expect the department and the police would be active if we had concerns about any child being at risk. In fact, their success in doing that resulted in a number of disclosures in that community.

Ms L. METTAM: The minister stated earlier that a number of support services will be working with the families that will be living in those nine or 10 properties. Is it fair to say that the minister is confident that no children who have been identified as victims of child sex abuse will be living with perpetrators in those properties?

[2.50 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: In the debate around what occurred in the west Pilbara, or at least what occurred in Roebourne, a number of parliamentary questions were asked about us understanding the perpetrators—people, and even children—who had exhibited harmful sexual behaviour and were still living in that community. It is the work of the police and also the courts to make sure that if there is an unacceptable level of risk and children are at harm, then we respond to that. That is the work of the Department of Communities not only in Roebourne but also across the state. I wish I could guarantee that no child is at risk throughout the state—I cannot do that. But through my work under my portfolio and with the department, our job is to make sure that we have strong legislation and good policies and practices in the department, and that we work effectively across government agencies. One example of working effectively is the department for child protection and family support working in lock step with police to have a credible presence in a community, and we have seen results. That is an example of where we need to stay the course in a community and build up good, strong relationships, and then we get, for instance, disclosures, which might have been otherwise very difficult to get. We need to make sure that there is good practice, which includes not only good cooperation across government agencies, but also working with not-for-profit organisations and the like to continue to emphasise the unequivocal message of child safety and the lack of tolerance to any compromise of child safety. It also includes building the capacity of not only the authority, but also the community to respond to and enforce child safety. That is one reason why we have taken the approach that we have to the west Pilbara plan.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I congratulate the minister on doing so well with a sore throat. I will change the subject completely now to talk about the hardship utility grant scheme. I refer to page 460, the table headed “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies”, and specifically the line item on the hardship utility grant scheme. Is the minister able to provide by way of supplementary information a list of how many HUGS applications were received, and how many were successful in obtaining assistance; and, if possible, could I have a breakdown of who has applied—a family, a household, a senior or a business—and received HUGS assistance for 2016–17, 2017–18 and 2018–19?

Ms S.F. McGURK: If I understood part of the member’s question correctly, did she ask whether businesses had applied for HUGS or were businesses given —

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I was asking about individuals who are business owners—I should have reframed the question. I am aware of a few people who have asked HUGS for assistance and are struggling business owners. Is the minister able to provide a breakdown of who has applied for HUGS?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am not sure that we capture that data in terms of the occupation of the applicants. Quite a bit of information has been given about the number of HUGS applicants. The history of this is that under the previous Liberal government there was a decoupling of HUGS applications from financial counselling. Prior to that decision, for a person to be eligible for HUGS they had to get financial counselling. The financial counsellors would then advise whether someone was eligible for HUGS. This relationship was decoupled by the previous Liberal government’s decision to dismantle metropolitan financial counselling. However, when that government then decided to put about half of the funding back in place in the metropolitan area, that decoupling remained. We inherited a situation of less financial counselling in the metropolitan area, and an unmet demand, and HUGS applicants

going straight to the utility providers. We have seen all sorts of variations in the number of applications. Part of our work has been to properly understand what is going on with the number of HUGS applications. When we reinstated financial counselling, which was one of our election commitments, we also continued support for the Financial Counselling Network, which is a joint effort by Anglicare WA and UnitingCare West to support some of the metropolitan-based financial counselling services. One of the benefits to come out of the network system is that we have better data collection, we are more informed and we have quality control of some of the services that are delivered, which has been useful. We are continuing to try to understand what is going on with the number of HUGS applicants, particularly since the decoupling under the previous government of HUGS from financial counselling—although that has now finally been reinstated completely. This will help us to implement or reinstate some integrity into the system, if you like, to ensure that financial counsellors are used where there is a genuine need to, most importantly, link in those people with other services if they are needed. I have read that of the number of people who were not concession card holders but who were eligible and applied for HUGS, a very high percentage ended up being referred to other services for assistance, which is what we want. We want people to be linked in with other assistance so that they can get back on their feet.

In relation to the data that the member asked about, we answer parliamentary questions on HUGS on a very regular basis. I would be surprised if we have not already provided answers to those questions. I do not imagine it would be difficult for us to provide those answers as supplementary information. Can the member please specify again the information that she requires, but not by occupation?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I appreciate the minister doing that. Just for clarification, can I have a breakdown of the number of people who have applied for the HUGS program and the number who have been successful—so there will be a difference, obviously—in 2016–17, 2017–18 and 2018–19?

The CHAIR: Does the minister agree to provide that?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I do.

[Supplementary Information No B32.]

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I refer to the same line item under the table headed “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies”. I note that the 2017–18 budget of \$25 million has dropped down to \$16 million—a \$9 million difference. Again, in 2018–19, a budget of \$16 million was allocated but only \$10 million was actually spent. Can the minister explain the \$9 million and \$6 million drop in both those years?

[3.00 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: As I outlined before, we have been supporting the Financial Counselling Network and the like, who are doing the third party external work to assess the eligibility of applicants to ensure that they have a genuine need for a hardship utility grant, and I think that is bearing some fruit. We are building up not only the capacity of those financial counselling services—I see only good work that they do—but also the sophistication of the support that they receive, as I said, from the data, the training and the call centres that they are working with. That is starting to have some effect on our total HUGS spend. Having said that, if there is a requirement to spend more than has been allocated, we will do what we have done in the past and seek additional funding, if it is needed. It is not the case that people would be refused a HUGS application because the bucket was empty. We need to make sure that we prioritise genuine hardship—that is obviously important—and that we link people in with other services, so that if they are experiencing hardship, it is as short-term as possible, and we give them the support that they need. We need to work with the utilities as well to make sure that they are doing their bit to support people who are struggling to pay their bills or might not be getting on top of their usage of whatever utility we are talking about—electricity or water—by putting them on, for instance, repayment plans. I know the Water Corporation has done some good work to properly understand where those debts come from, if it relates to something that the utility has control over.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Is it the minister’s understanding that the \$6 million drop from the figures in 2017–18 and 2018–19 is due to the third party assessment process that she has introduced? I think there is a 180-day waiting time for that assessment process; I am happy for the minister to correct me. Is that what the minister is referring to? What are the criteria that have resulted in this massive decline in funding that is not enabling people to access this grant?

Ms S.F. McGURK: Just to clarify, a 180-day waiting time is not in itself one of the criteria. The applicant needs to demonstrate a preparedness to contribute to their debt over that time, by arranging a co-payment. It is asking those people who are experiencing difficulty to demonstrate their preparedness to make some contribution to that debt. That is what we expect to happen in that waiting time.

I have just been reminded of one of the other changes, which is that from 1 July this year, all applicants will be referred to the HUGS service centre or financial counselling for additional advice. The process I outlined before

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Thursday, 23 May 2019]

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Chair; Mrs Alyssa Hayden; Ms Simone McGurk; Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Shane Love; Amber-Jade Sanderson;
Mrs Lisa O'Malley; Ms Cassandra Rowe

was that under the previous government, people were not required to go to financial counselling in order to apply for HUGS. Some money was then reinstated to financial counselling, but when we came to government, applicants were still going straight to the utilities. When we came to government, after looking at the expenditure on HUGS and trying to understand what was happening with HUGS applications, we said that non-concession cardholders would need to go to financial counselling. From 1 July, all applicants will be required to go to financial counselling, or the HUGS service centre, which is the same thing—financial counsellors sit within the HUGS service centre. That was a longwinded way of saying that there will be a change in criteria from 1 July, so all applicants will go via the HUGS service centre or financial counselling, and we are confident that that will further identify those people who are in real need. As I said before, in the past when people continued to be in need, but there was not adequate budget allocation, Treasury has considered a transfer of funds in relation to that item.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The minister mentioned the criteria change on 1 July. Is she talking about 1 July coming up?

Ms S.F. McGURK: That is right, 1 July 2019. We have been public about that; all applicants will be referred to the HUGS service centre.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Is that available online to the public right now?

Ms S.F. McGURK: It is, essentially, a phone service that is operating out of Armadale.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Am I able to get some detail about what that criteria change on 1 July will be?

Ms S.F. McGURK: That information is available publicly now. We have been very transparent. From 1 July, all applicants for HUGS will need to go to the HUGS service centre. Essentially, from 1 July 2019, we are reinstating what the previous Liberal government dismantled when it said that people did not have to go to financial counselling in order to be eligible for HUGS.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The minister also referred to people who were not able to get past the criteria and had been referred to other services. Is the minister able to advise what those services are, and are they funded by the state government or are they not-for-profit organisations?

Ms S.F. McGURK: From July 2018 to February 2019, 88 per cent of HUGS applicants who were non-concession cardholders had been referred to other support services. They include mental health, emergency relief, financial counselling, community legal centres, parenting, family support and employment services. Obviously, many of them are state-funded; some are federal.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The minister said that if there is more demand than the \$10 million that has been allocated in the forward estimates, money is available to top that up. The budget here says \$10 million. Where is that pool of money sitting right now? Is that in the budget somewhere else, under another portfolio, as a little bucket alongside, safely put away for the HUGS program if and when needed? Can I find out where that is?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will hand over to the chief financial officer to talk about the technicalities, but essentially we go to Treasury to ask it for some additional appropriation. I will hand over to Liam Carren.

Mr L. Carren: I thank the minister, and I thank the member for the question. There is no specific discrete fallback provision within the budget within the Department of Communities or Treasury. The minister is referring to the normal way that an agency manages its budget. We are given a bottom-line appropriation, and from time to time there is underspend due to timing issues or vacant positions. Sometimes there are projects that do not run as fast as had been thought. We have an internal reporting framework, and we monitor our budget on a monthly basis. We will look at all the variances, and through that process we have ongoing discussions with Treasury about our budget position. Through those discussions, if some underspends are identified, we will look at using those underspends if there is some spike in HUGS applications and HUGS spending. That is the process that we use to deal with all our variances to make sure that we minimise the impact of net debt on the government's budget position, and we have been quite successful in doing that, through that sort of process.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: There is no guarantee right now that HUGS is going to get the money. I know that the minister will go and champion hard—I do not doubt her passion for this at all—but there is no guarantee right now in the budget that if the scheme does go over \$10 million, the department will be able to allocate an increased requirement to the HUGS program if people need it.

[3.10 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: Perhaps I overstated the need to get authorisation from Treasury for those additional spends in terms of the discretionary level within the department, as Liam said. In the past, applicants for the hardship utility grant scheme have not been turned away because sufficient funds for that financial relief have not been allocated in the budget. I am confident that we will continue to work with the financial counselling services and the utilities to monitor what is going on with HUGS applications to make sure that that money goes to those in need and that people in need are not being refused assistance because of the budget allocation that has been given.

I am confident of that. I think there is a challenge with hardship utility grants generally to make sure that they go to people in need. That is why we changed some of the funding criteria and reinstated the HUGS service centre. That has financial counsellors to not only direct people to other services but also make sure that they have genuine hardship claims. As the Premier said, he is eligible. The member and I are eligible for HUGS. I think most reasonable people would not think that that is right. We need to continue to work with the service centres, interrogate the information that people give us, link with other services if people need them and work with the utilities to make sure that the assistance goes to the people who really need it.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I want to follow up on some of the discussion. The member for Darling Range made a statement that the estimated amount and the actual amount were different for the 2018–19 period. One was \$16 million and one was \$10 million. My budget copy says that \$16 million was spent in 2018–19. The minister in response to some questions also said that 85 per cent of people were referred to other services. How has the department arrived at a budget slash of \$6 million in this area, because the referral to other services from 1 July is not going to make that much difference if 85 per cent of people are already being sent elsewhere for a discussion? Is it not a bit disingenuous to cut \$6 million from a program that has been costing us \$16 million every year and then present that to Parliament, when it seems to me that the minister and the department already know that is not enough money, hence the discussion about fallback to Treasury? Would it not be less disingenuous to come in here with a budget figure that is more reflective of what the minister expects to happen throughout next year?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am not sure that I understand the member's connection and his point about referring people to other services. That is not in lieu of giving them access to HUGS. It may or may not be in addition to HUGS. That ensures that the reason they are applying for HUGS is addressed, whether that is mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, employment issues and the like. It is most importantly about financial counselling. That is when we refer people to other services. We are saying that the new system that we have put in as a government, a system that was dismantled by the previous government, is effective because we are demonstrating that people are interested in being linked to other supports as well as HUGS.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Yet this year it still cost the government \$16 million in HUGS grants but it will magically drop down to \$10 million next year, with what justification? What will be different from the last two years when it was \$16 million a year? Suddenly, it will be down to \$10 million. Why does the minister think that will change?

The CHAIR: Member, I think the minister was still replying. Minister, are you happy to continue?

Ms S.F. McGURK: There have been a couple of changes. As I explained before, one is that concession card holders will now be required from 1 July to go through the HUGS service centre. The veracity of their application will be further interrogated and that will be further examined. The member for Darling Range referred to the changes in some of the criteria that we put in place. Applicants have to demonstrate their preparedness to contribute to paying off their debt, and that occurs over 180 days. A minimum \$300 debt must be in place. Already, for the year to date for 2018–19 as at 31 March 2019, the total spend was \$5.285 million. Already, the number of HUGS applications has reduced as a result of putting in those criteria. We need to make sure that putting in those criteria is not cutting off those in need. We do not want to do that. We want to make sure that we are getting assistance to people who need it, that we are encouraging people in hardship to make some contribution to the debt that they have incurred and that we are linking them to other services. They are all the things we are trying to do. To date, that seems to be winding back some of the spend in HUGS but we are cautious about that and we will continue to work with the service providers and the utilities to make sure, as I said, that we are giving assistance to people who need it.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I understand that, which is why I am somewhat bemused about the government slashing the figure so much next year when the estimated amount for the actual this year is still listed as \$16 million with those changes already instigated. How does the minister estimate that we will be cutting it down to that level? Either one of these figures is wrong or the government is not having such an impact as the minister claims. The figure in the budget is \$16 million for the actual for this year. Is that figure right or wrong?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I do not know whether the member was listening when I said that as of March 2019 —

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am listening.

The CHAIR: Member!

Ms S.F. McGURK: As of 31 March 2019, the approved application spend was \$5.285 million. It is significantly lower. The budget information for the budget papers is submitted in December. The department, with Treasury, does its best to give the best information it can. We are cautious about all the HUGS spend and we continue to work closely with the Treasurer's office and the Minister for Energy, who is responsible for many of the utilities, to make sure that they are doing their bit. In 2019–20, \$3.4 million will be spent on providing supports through the HUGS service centre. Significant dollars are being put in to make sure that we give people not only money but also the right supports and information to understand where their hardship has come from in the first place.

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Mr R.S. LOVE: Can the minister ask her department, her chief finance officer or whoever, to provide me with the up-to-date estimate of the HUGS cost for 2018–19?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I just gave the member a figure to 31 March.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am asking the minister for the estimate for the year.

[3.20 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: We also put the specifics into our annual report every year. It will have the actual spends that occur through HUGS. We have been very transparent about all of this process. Under the previous Liberal–National government, changes were made to this system and, as a result, we saw quite significant changes in the spend on HUGS. We have put a lot of effort into trying to understand what is happening with those spending trends and making sure that assistance is going to those in need. The figure I gave the member to 31 March 2019 was \$5.285 million. In the budget, where the member refers to \$16 million, the title of that column is “Estimated Actual” in millions. There has been some fluctuation, and changing the criteria, which was much publicised and criticised by the opposition, caused a drop-off in spend because there was a waiting period. We are out of that waiting period now, so people who were on hold, if you like, or who were making contributions during that time have come out of it, so we have seen the spend pick up again, and we are continuing to do the work. We are not hiding any of the amounts we are spending. As I said, I regularly answer questions in this Parliament about our HUGS spend, and I am happy to keep doing so. I hope that addresses the discrepancy between the estimated actual and the budget estimate on our HUGS spend between 2018–19 and 2019–20. There has been a change in criteria. We are moving people through the HUGS service centre, and we are trying to link them to additional supports. We are trying to work with the utilities, and we will keep monitoring that to make sure we get assistance to people who really need it.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Further to that, and by way of clarification, when I said that in 2017–18 there was a \$9 million drop, it was because the previous budget had \$25 million and the government spent only \$16 million, and then in 2018–19, \$16 million dropped down to \$10 million. The minister keeps talking about the previous government, but the changes that this government and the minister have made have been to tighten up the criteria of the HUGS program. People who owe less than \$300 are not able to get assistance. People are in hardship whether they owe \$50, \$100 or \$1 000. That is their own personal hardship; it is all relative. I can assure the minister that people come through my office in Byford who have not eaten in three weeks, because they simply do not have \$2 to get some food. The minister is saying that if people do not have a debt of \$300, they cannot be assisted by the HUGS program, but she is proud to say that she has reduced the budget by \$6 million over the forward estimates each year. It is a \$6 million saving each year, and she is doing well by Treasury, and I am sure that Treasury is really happy with her, but is the HUGS program delivering to the people who are really in hardship, whether they owe \$100 or \$300? I would like to know where the minister got the \$300 limit from. If someone is in debt for \$150 and they do not have a way of paying it, and they have a family, where do they get help?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I would be concerned and, quite frankly, amazed if someone in the member’s electorate had not eaten for three weeks, but I suppose that is another matter.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I am not lying. I have had them in my office and I have fed them.

The CHAIR: Member, you have asked a question. Please allow the minister to give her response.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: She is alluding that I am lying.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am not saying that the member is lying. First of all, if there is an increase in spending on HUGS, there is criticism of the government because we have put up utility prices too high, creating cost-of-living pressures, and that is why we have to increase HUGS spending. When we refine the process and make sure we work with external third party assessors to make sure that the HUGS spend is going to areas of immediate need—people who are at risk of disconnection—and put in place more rigorous criteria, we are heartless and not giving money to people in need. The idea of HUGS is to support people at risk of imminent disconnection. It is not intended to be a welfare supplement. It is a utilities grant scheme for people who are at risk of disconnection.

We need to work with the utilities as well. Some of them have been more proactive than others in this work. I single out the Water Corporation, which has done some really good work trying to understand the nature of the accumulation of debt and bills by different people. There is a bit less pressure on the Water Corporation because often the debt, if people are renting privately, will be incurred by the landlord rather than the tenant. In any case, I think the Water Corporation has been a lot more proactive, and I would like to see that taken up by other utility companies as well.

We offer a range of different assistance across my portfolio and others for people in hardship. Over \$90 million is allocated to homelessness services across the state, and that includes domestic violence services as well. There is financial counselling and a range of services, including intensive family support, whereby we work with vulnerable

families and the like. Our government does a lot of work to support people in need. This is a specific grant to assist people who are at risk of disconnection of their utilities.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I would like to ask about the regional community childcare development fund. There is a line item in the table on page 460 for the regional community childcare development fund. It is the last line item under “Community Services”. We see that the money for that fund has dried up. With issues in the communities, especially the goldfields, why has the government decided not to continue this funding; and has the minister any program or service in place to replace what that program was trying to do?

Ms S.F. McGURK: The regional community childcare development fund was facilitated through royalties for regions, and demonstrates the McGowan government’s commitment to directing funding to the regions to build community capacity, support economic diversity and skills development, and create jobs in local communities. I know that the member has asked me about this in the Legislative Assembly at times, but the fund is aimed at improving the availability and sustainability of community-managed early childhood education and care services in regions where it would be otherwise difficult to offer those services. It also links in with our government’s commitment to the wellbeing of children in the early years, as well as a strong economy in the regions.

Stage 1 of the regional community childcare development program is complete, and stage 2 has built on its success. Two new service delivery models are now up and running, with support from stage 2 of the funding process, and they will be self-sustaining by the end of the project. The idea of this project was never that it would be an ongoing grant or subsidy for regional child care or regional early childhood education. That was never its intention. The intention was to help support the development of a model that would make child care self-sufficient in the regions. The model in the wheatbelt region, for instance, was to build the capacity through Regional Early Education and Development—REED. The authorisation to run child care is held by a central body, and as a result of that, it could service a range of different community-based centres. Otherwise, those individual community-based organisations would be exposed to the vagaries of different families moving on or different community management groups coming and going, which is what happens with community centres because they do not really have the size. So that resource is held centrally and the capacity of the organisation is built up, and then it runs a series of individual community-based organisations. That seems to be going quite well. This was never intended to be an ongoing subsidy for regional child care or early education services. However, everything I have seen so far indicates that it is delivering what was intended—that is, to help fund the creation of a sustainable model so that families in regional centres can have childcare centres operate in their smaller communities and economies. That is an enormous challenge, but what has been done through this fund has been really fantastic.

[3.30 pm]

Mr R.S. LOVE: Is there any money in the budget to help communities develop childcare services in their areas in the future? In other words, can the minister point to any other programs that support child care in regional WA?

Ms S.F. McGURK: Unlike schools, health services or hospitals, the state does not provide child care anywhere in Western Australia. That is the first thing to understand. The idea of this fund, which was facilitated through royalties for regions, was to develop a model that could be self-sustaining. From everything that I have seen, it has been successful in that. Stage 1 is complete and stage 2 is now moving to extend that similar model.

In some regional centres—in Port Hedland, for instance—the community is frustrated by the lack of affordable childcare options. When we went to the region to do a community cabinet, I met with the Mayor of Port Hedland and we spoke about the role of local government and the community to work together to identify possible solutions. Our department will try to assist them in doing that, but we do not provide child care in the metropolitan area or the regions.

The early childhood regulation unit is responsible for regulating and overseeing the regulation of services and for giving them support. That unit can provide some support and advice to regional centres when people are frustrated at a dearth of childcare options. As I said, there is an issue in Hedland, and this issue came up publicly in another regional community, but I cannot recall it. We will try to work with those communities, but, frankly, that happens in the metropolitan area as well. There is a lag between community demand for child care and supply, which is driven by the market. One of the benefits of community-based child care is that it is less exposed to the vagaries of the market. The profit layer is removed from the equation, so it can be a little more available. In any case, that is one of the challenges of child care across the country.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I think the other community the minister was referring to was Kalgoorlie in the goldfields.

Ms S.F. McGURK: It might be.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The department had a program to develop the model. Is there no funding or support to expand the model, make it available to other areas or actively promote it? The model now sits in whatever community that

has developed it and that is great for that community. Is the minister's department not under some sort of obligation to make sure that that model is available in other communities? How many models did the department produce? I think the minister mentioned that there were two stages, two types of communities or two different models. I am a bit unsure about what the minister meant by stage 1 and stage 2. Surely there must be a stage 3, in which that information is disseminated to other communities.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I just received advice about that point. Stage 1 was to set up the model, which started in the wheatbelt area and is now being implemented through Regional Early Education and Development. Stage 2 is the availability of grants for different regional centres to apply that model in their areas. The grants program closed at the end of 2018. As of 31 March 2019, it has provided total funding of \$821 000 to seven projects. An additional four projects totalling \$355 000 have recently been approved and are currently at the contract negotiation stage. I can give the member some examples of those. There are grants that directly address the strategy to improve early childhood education and care engagement. A number of those are specifically targeted at Aboriginal communities. I am happy to hand over to Brad Jolly, who might want to give a bit more detail about this strategy.

Mr B.P. Jolly: I will pick up on a couple of the points the minister has made. This program was very much geared towards improving the sustainability of services in the regions of Western Australia. The minister has referred to stage 1 and stage 2 of the program. The key component of stage 1 was an exercise undertaken in each development commission region. A community organisation was contracted to undertake a mapping exercise of children's services, programs and supports that were available in each region. It then identified service delivery gaps in those regions. As a result, each region received a children's services plan. A number of issues that were identified across each of the regions were common in regional areas right across the state. Those issues were lifted out of the regional plans and formed part of the statewide regional plan. Those foundations were established under stage 1.

Stage 2 provided funding for strategic initiatives such as the one the minister referred to in the wheatbelt through Regional Early Education and Development, in which an auspicing organisation provided backbone support to a number of services. Importantly, it also provided two grant programs—an operational grant program and a strategic grant program. That enabled regional services to apply for grants under each of those two programs to specifically address the gaps identified in each region's children's services plan. By the very nature of the program, it was consciously intended to address sustainability. Each of those grants was intended to lead towards the sustainable operation of those services in the regions. By virtue of that, it was intended to be a time-limited program.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That grant money is now expended. Are there any plans to continue this type of program in the future to assist other communities as they become aware of needs they might have, or is it that this program has ended and there will be no further funding for child care in the regions?

[3.40 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: One of the benefits of the approach that has been taken with the initial wheatbelt process, which has commenced, is that it is quite a transferable model and would be publicly available now. As I said, the education and care regulatory unit within the department provides some support and assistance for the sector. We endeavour to do that. Frankly, as I said, this lag and challenge of childcare availability in communities is faced across the country and is often discussed. I am not saying that we are not concerned about this problem, but I think it has been a really solid model that we have been able to support for regional Western Australia. It is one that does not rely on ongoing funding by the government; rather, it is a self-sustaining model that should provide access to early childhood education for regional families. It is great for the community and it is great for working families but, importantly, it is great for those in the early years in those regional centres.

Ms A. SANDERSON: I refer to page 446 of budget paper No 2 and the Early Years Initiative. Is the minister able to provide an update and overview of the Early Years Initiative?

Ms S.F. McGURK: As the member may be aware, the Early Years Initiative is a 10-year partnership between the state government, the Telethon Kids Institute and Minderoo Foundation, recognising that every child has the opportunity and confidence to flourish in Western Australia. Sadly, we know from the Australian Early Development Census that by the age of four, one in five children are mentally vulnerable. I find that unacceptable, and I think most members of this Parliament would find it unacceptable. We know that investment in the early years really pays dividends. We are looking at modelling four sites across the state at which we would try to work across government and look at how we can do things differently, in partnership with community organisations and the community itself, and be innovative in those communities, from zero—through pregnancy, for instance, for women—to age four. This is on the back of quite rigorous advocacy on the part of the Telethon Kids Institute. It has been a real champion of this initiative. It has been recognised across our state and around the world. Also, Minderoo Foundation has contributed to this project not only by way of support, but also in financial terms.

Four low-income sites, including one in a very remote area, a regional area and a metropolitan area, will be selected to participate based on data about high levels of early childhood vulnerability. The first partner site has been announced, and that will be in the great southern region, consisting of Katanning, Broomehill–Tambellup, Kojonup and Gnowangerup. The remaining three sites will be announced this year. This is not just a government decision; it is a decision of a governing board that comprises the Telethon Kids Institute, Minderoo and the state government. It links in quite well with one of our priorities that the Premier announced earlier this year—“A bright future”—again recognising that too many Western Australians were developmentally vulnerable by the time they were expected to participate in school. We know that once they fall behind, it is quite likely that they will continue to fall behind. It is a very clear and known marker of future disadvantage. We hope that we can make a difference by doing things differently.

As I said, there is a governing board that comprises two independent co-chairs—Sue Gordon and Sue Ash—our partner representatives, and also the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Further to that question, I guess the initiative is said to be a demonstration of how the state government will partner with others to achieve the early childhood and wellbeing target. Does this mean that if it is expanded to communities apart from the three that the minister has outlined, they will be announced shortly? Will it become more widespread at some point? Is there a budget to achieve that, or will it sit there for 10 years and be assessed and then at some point in the future a government might take on some of the lessons of it? It is a good scheme. I congratulate everybody involved in it. It is much needed. I would hate to think that other communities could not share very quickly in the lessons that are learnt. I am wondering how some of the new practices or initiatives that are put in place under this scheme might transfer more quickly to other communities. I imagine that within our resources of government at the moment, we could do things differently and not need further budgets but just rearrange the way things are done. Can the minister explain to me how this will benefit other communities?

Ms S.F. MCGURK: The point the member makes is a good one and it is built into the program. The idea of a 10-year program is not that we sit back and wait to see how it has gone at the end of the 10 years to determine whether we have learnt lessons but, in fact, evaluate it over time. Having a partner such as the Telethon Kids Institute with its research acumen not only brings an ability to find out what is good practice or innovative around the world, but also gives us really credible research and longitudinal data to map what is going on with those communities. That is a big element of what we are doing.

The idea is that when we start to see some results or good initiatives, we are able to pick up that innovation in government and implement it through the Department of Communities as the lead agency. As I said, it does link very importantly to “Our Priorities: Sharing Prosperity” targets that were announced by the government. I am very proud that it has an early years target. It is not easy for governments—in some ways it is very obvious—because the benefits of a change in the way we do things in the early years will not often be realised beyond a term of government. That is the challenge. It is very much linked to “A bright future”, which is one of the targets in the early years around that developmental vulnerability that is identified in the census.

I hope that answers the member’s question. The idea of the 10-year program is not that we sit back and look at it at the end of the 10 years, but that it is a longitudinal piece of work that gives us good data, innovation, a different way of doing things on the ground, a different way of practice and then a way of studying that. If we get results through that time, we very much intend to apply them.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I have a comment to make as a follow-up, and maybe a question. Under the previous government, there was a program called Better Beginnings, which was probably trying to achieve some of the outcomes that the minister is now referring to. I saw that program having success in communities such as Moora but, unfortunately, it was a victim of some cutbacks and ceased. I attest very strongly to the need for a program such as this. I hope that it can not only be rolled out as quickly as possible to the three other communities, but also begin to influence the way government does business in other communities as quickly as possible, including communities such as Moora.

[3.50 pm]

Ms S.F. MCGURK: I will take that as a comment. I know there was a big change in the parenting services support under the previous coalition government. I was very concerned about some of those changes too. This is very much intended to provide best practice in a concentrated way for identified communities, and it does not mean that we stop innovating or adopting any change anywhere else, but if Best Beginnings or any other program has good results, we would make sure that it was part of the mix. In these four sites, it is also important to note that we want to involve the community. It is not us saying that we know best and this is what needs to happen. As I have identified in other answers during these proceedings, we need to work with the community, listen to it genuinely and try to build all our capacity to deliver better government agencies, community organisations and communities

themselves. This is designed to have all those elements. Generally, we have to have much more rigour and discipline around evidence-based practice in our community services work. That is a challenge because, as I said, often this work takes time to realise good outcomes, but we need to start doing that, and it is very much part of the reform we are approaching in the Department of Communities.

Meeting suspended from 3.50 to 4.03 pm

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to the line item “Employees (Full-Time Equivalents)” under point 5, “Child Protection Assessments and Investigations”, on page 451 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2. I refer to the 518 full-time equivalent employees listed for 2019–20. Of the 518 employees, how many are allocated to the south west region?

Ms S.F. McGURK: We have a specific breakdown of staff by region that is available. The staff are allocated depending on the demand occurring in each region. That demand model was agreed to under the previous director general, Emma White, with the Department of Treasury, so demands around the state are responded to. If there is an increase in demand in a particular region, it is met by a reduction in spend in another area when there has been a reduction in demand in that area, not by forcing a reduction in funding. If increased funding is required, Treasury will hear of those demands. I will check whether we have the specific figures here. In fact, we do not have them with us. I am happy to provide by way of supplementary information the FTE for the south west district, if that is what the member is asking for.

Ms L. METTAM: Could I have that as supplementary information for 2017–18, 2018–19 and 2019–20? This follows on from a question I have asked on notice.

The CHAIR: Say exactly what you would like, and I will allocate a reference number.

Ms L. METTAM: Specifically, I would like the number of full-time equivalent positions for 2017–18, 2018–19 and proposed for 2019–20 for the south west region.

The CHAIR: Minister, is that acceptable?

Ms S.F. McGURK: The member needs to be a bit more specific in what service she is asking about. Is it child protection assessment and investigations?

Ms L. METTAM: Correct, yes.

Ms S.F. McGURK: The financial figures for 2019–20 will not yet be available, but we are happy to give what is available for the previous years to date.

[Supplementary Information No B33.]

Ms L. METTAM: Given that the number of monitored cases in the south west district has increased from 26 cases in July 2017 to 85 cases in July 2018, does the minister expect that there will be an increase in resources? Can the minister advise what has accounted for the significant increase in the number of monitored child protection cases?

[4.10 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: We answered a question on this matter on 14 March. I do not know whether the member agrees with me, but when I first heard the term “monitored cases”, I thought it was a little misleading, because monitored cases are distinct from those that are being actively managed by the department. Monitored cases refers to new or existing low-risk cases that are not allocated to a caseworker, but they are allocated and monitored regularly by a senior and experienced child protection professional, the team leader. Monitored cases might actually be a way of managing risk within the case load. As I said, those children who are either new or existing low-risk cases are essentially put on the monitored list. The fact that there might be an increase in those does not mean that there is an increase in demand for or activity by the district office. It might in fact reflect what is going on with a number of actively managed cases. Children in care on the monitored list are settled with their needs being met. If concerns are raised about any child on the monitored list, a review is undertaken by senior staff and an immediate allocation to a caseworker occurs, and then more active work follows. As I referred to earlier with regard to the demand model, one way to ensure that there are no shortfalls in demand for children either who are in care or who, on occasions, the department becomes aware of and whose needs are not being met, is that funding is allocated to those cases.

Ms L. METTAM: It is a significant increase. I take on board the minister’s comments, but has there been a shift in what constitutes a monitored case? What has changed to cause the number of monitored cases to more than triple? Has there been a policy change or are we looking at an increased level of concern? I accept that we are talking about low-risk cases, but what has changed?

Ms S.F. McGURK: First of all, there has been no change in the criteria.

The south west district has seen a significant growth in complexity of children coming into care due to the increased use of drugs and the rise in the incidence of domestic violence in the area. This increased demand was not met with increased resourcing in 2017–18 and has resulted in a higher level of monitored cases across the district. It is also

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noted that the monitored caseloads are reported at a point in time, so natural fluctuations due to staffing levels may impact these figures. To answer the member's question, we think there has been a rise in activity in the south west as a result of drug and alcohol use and family and domestic violence cases and we are endeavouring to respond to that. I am happy to talk more about some of those drivers, particularly in my portfolio of family and domestic violence, and how we are trying to not only respond to the urgent needs of children who are at risk and manage those cases, but also work a little earlier down the pipeline in terms of some of the drivers of those cases.

Ms L. METTAM: Is it possible to get a breakdown within the region of where those cases are—I am feeling that the answer is no—or is the south west as good as we get for the number of monitored cases?

Ms S.F. McGURK: That is right. It is important to make the distinction that monitored cases are not all the cases being handled by Child Protection. They are the low-risk cases that are being managed. Those considered to be higher risk are actively case-managed by childcare workers and professionals within the district office.

I mentioned before that there was an increase in demand prior to us coming into office. That was also manifest in 2017–18. In 2018–19, an extra care team of four additional full-time equivalent officers was applied to the south west district to help manage that extra demand. One of the concerns about breaking down any data by town or more specific area is the identification of families and the like. Those cases need to be understood in the context of other information that is given in police reports and the like. The formation of the new Department of Communities has given us an opportunity to pull together a range of data sources to work with vulnerable families in the community.

Ms L. METTAM: Knowing that there has been this increase, will additional resources be provided? Can the minister clarify, by way of supplementary information or otherwise, what the additional resources will be for 2019–20?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I might hand over to one of the assistant directors general to speak about that process. I reiterate that for 2018–19 we allocated an extra care team, which is four FTEs, to the south west district to respond to that demand. I might hand over to assistant director general Jackie Tang to talk about the process by which we allocate resources throughout the state.

Mrs J. Tang: In relation to child protection staffing, an allocation of additional funding is given to the department each year, which is worked out with Treasury. Some of that relates to straight subsidies such as foster carer subsidies, and we have to allocate those taking into account the growth rate for the year. We are then left with an allocation of funds that is determined statewide. I work on that, together with my fellow assistant director general. The sorts of things we look at are the number of children coming into care. There is a list of criteria for a care team and the number of children it might manage. In the last two years, we have made the district structures very consistent across the state so that when we allocate funds, we are working across a consistent formula—not just giving a little bit more to everyone, but giving it to where the actual need is. We then work through a number of stats. First, we look at the structures and whether they have sufficient staffing in them. It is also important to know what children are coming into demand—the monitored list. I will just clarify that the monitored list contains low-risk cases, which might be children in the final stages of the unification. They are not children who are at high risk who we are not overseeing. The monitored list is one of the allocations. We might also provide funding not necessarily for more child protection workers, but possibly Aboriginal practice leaders, support staff or the fundamental case-support workers underneath that. We are currently in the process of going through that. Rachael and I are keen to understand how we fairly and transparently allocate money across the state so that when a need has been strongly identified, staff can understand why resources are going to a certain place and effectively manage the risk and demand. We are right in the middle of that at the moment. We cannot bring those positions on until 1 July because that is when the new funding begins. We are trying to work these things out now so that the time between making that decision and recruitment is reduced and we can hit the ground running when we get that funding on 1 July. It is something that we are always attuned to, and although we cannot say for sure what each region will get, it is based on demand and risk.

[4.20 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will add another comment on that point, which does not just relate to the south west, but I was looking at the note that was given to me when I spoke about the additional allocations in 2018. Members might be interested to know that in 2018–19, that demand model provided funding for an additional 13 FTEs in regional districts. Those new positions were in response to the growth in the number of children in care. I hope they demonstrate our commitment to not only be flexible, but also provide extra resources if they are needed, particularly in the regions. That was 5.5 FTEs in the Murchison; two FTEs in the Pilbara; as I mentioned, four FTEs in the south west; and 1.5 FTEs in the wheatbelt. That was on top of 2017–18. The positions funded through demand funding were for 13 permanent FTEs with two new positions, and permanently funding 11 FTE positions for the Pilbara and Kimberley joint response team. There are six FTEs in the West Kimberley—they are permanent positions—three in the East Kimberley and four in the Pilbara, which I think I might have mentioned. I make the point that if there is demand anywhere, we will meet it. That is the agreement we have with Treasury. When necessary, we are putting extra resources into the regions. I wish we did not have to; I am sure members do too.

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Ms L. METTAM: Are the four additional FTEs for the south west all based in Bunbury?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I cannot answer that. I really want to emphasise that we do encourage the district offices to be flexible and respond to what is required across their district. I understand that they need to have relationships with the families and the communities within which they work, but it will be necessary at times for district offices to have some agility. That is the point about working within districts.

Ms L. METTAM: Perhaps I could get as supplementary information where the four FTEs are from. From a community perspective, Busselton is the largest local government area and it is also very close to outlying smaller towns such as Margaret River and Augusta. Given its strategic location and given the significant amount of resources that have been directed into Bunbury, particularly in recent times, there is a great concern amongst community services that sometimes Busselton is overlooked as an important strategic centre for these sorts of services.

Ms S.F. McGURK: Can I respond to that, because in regard to child protection issues, I take exception to that, and I do not say that the member was directing it at me personally. If there is a demand for child protection work, if children are at risk and there is a demand for activity anywhere in the state, whether in Busselton or anywhere else, we are endeavouring to meet that demand. Having extra FTEs placed in Busselton should not be the criterion for whether children are safe or come before the Department of Communities or not. It is important that we have a good, strong regional presence, and we are present in as many communities as we can be, as much as possible, but I would be very concerned if child safety was compromised by the number of FTEs that we have placed in Busselton. It is not my understanding; it is not the way that the department works. I know senior management would be concerned about that as well.

Ms M.J. Andrews: Yes. I can confirm that in the short period that I have been in the role of director general, I have had those conversations with both assistant directors overseeing the service delivery in the metropolitan area and in the regions. It has been about responding to different pressures and moving staff in response to that, obviously, in a supportive way with the staff, but that absolutely has to be how we are responding to pressures across the region, and moving staff around to deal with that.

Ms L. METTAM: Just to clarify, could I get the location of the four FTEs as supplementary information?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I do not understand the rationale for the question. I am concerned that we would be encouraging a bidding war between different electorates to say that members want more child protection workers placed in their electorates because it would make children in their electorates safer. If there is a concern about child safety in the member's electorate, she needs to tell us, and we will work with her to address that. My ministerial office and my department work very hard to not only respond to local members' concerns—I know I have answered questions from a number of local members about individual cases—but also, if there are systemic issues or particular issues, get in there and address that. The point is also being made to me that building up the community capacity and our partnership with community organisations operating throughout the state is really crucial. So this is not a bidding war between electorates to say, "I can get more child protection workers in my electorate and therefore deliver." If anyone has concerns about child safety or any of the vulnerable families who are present in their community, we will endeavour to work with them. We want to be proactive as much as we can in working with those families. In fact, we have made a significant budget investment early on in the pipeline for intensive family support for vulnerable families to try to stem the number of children coming into care but at the same time keep them safe to do that intensive family support.

Ms L. METTAM: I was not suggesting a bidding war. Given the minister is saying that the additional FTEs will reflect where the demand is in the south west, I was asking where the four FTEs will go.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I refer to page 460 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, the table "Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies", and the line item "Grandcarers Support Grants". I want an explanation of the spend. I note it is not in this budget—it was in the one before—but \$960 000 was allocated for 2017–18 and only \$736 000 was spent. Can the minister explain what the drop was? Why was \$224 000 of the allocation not spent in 2017–18? Can the minister advise who gets these grants and, even by way of supplementary information, provide me with a list of who gets the grants in 2017–18 and 2018–19?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I want to understand the member's question. Was it that in 2017–18, the actual was \$736 000, but in 2018–19, the budget was \$1.05 million?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: No; my question was that there was \$960 000 estimated for 2017–18, but only \$736 000 was spent.

[4.30 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: Is the member looking at previous budget papers that say that it was estimated?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: That is right.

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Ms S.F. McGURK: The grants comprise two elements. One is the grandcarers support scheme, which is the annual payment of \$400 for the first grandchild and \$250 for each subsequent grandchild, and the other is the respite program. There was a bit of publicity about that because that was originally funded under the previous government for a fixed term. That fixed term came to an end and we agreed to extend the funding. What I understand would have occurred between the 2017 budgeted amount and the actual was how much was accessed under the support scheme by grandcarers. I know that is frustrating, because grandcarers do incredible work and often are not given the support that they need. We understand that. We are trying to do the best we can to respond to those needs. It is frustrating to think that money was there that was not accessed, but in that case it was not.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Is Wanslea Family Services a receiver of these grants? I know that the minister referred to the respite program, but I am referring to the grandcarer support grants line. Is Wanslea funded through this line item or in a different section?

Ms S.F. McGURK: Wanslea is paid a separate amount—about \$200 000—to administer the scheme. These line items refer to the grants.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Wanslea's funding does not come out of that line item, so could the minister point to which line item that comes out of?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am advised it is service 1, community services, on page 449.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Whereabouts, sorry?

Ms S.F. McGURK: It is not allocated specifically to different services. Service 1 states —

Provision of community services across Western Australia: Working with Children Checks to increase child safety, regulation and quality assurance of early education and care services, and delivery of benefits and concessions including Seniors Card and other support services.

There are a number of items.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I thank the minister for that because I could not find it anywhere. Wanslea is saying that its funding agreement expires at the end of the year. Is funding allocated in this budget to continue forward? Is there a plan to continue the funding for Wanslea?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I answered a question without notice about grandcarers support, I think from the member for Darling Range, in the Legislative Assembly only recently. I said in that answer that we are reviewing the supports that we have given to grandcarers and, as the member has said, the Wanslea funding will go until the end of this year. We will consider the best way to deliver for grandcarers. That does not mean that we will not fund Wanslea. I understand it is the nature of the funding that it receives from government for a range of different services. It is participating with us in that review, so it has a seat at the table to give feedback on the work that it does to support grandcarers across the state.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: With Wanslea's agreement running out in December, for how long has the department been working on this and what is the minister's time frame? I am sure the minister does not want to go down the same path as the neighbourhood centres when there was a long period of agreements being extended and a lot of distress. As we know, grandcarers get very little support as it is. The last thing we want to do is put extra stress on these very extraordinary individuals in our community, supporting our young children. Wanslea obviously has been around for a long time and is a great organisation. I would hate for it to think that its agreement or ongoing funding would be in jeopardy. I would like to understand the reason that the minister is reviewing the agreement, the goal and the time frame.

Ms S.F. McGURK: As I said when we started this line of questioning, the member might have noticed that we have increased the amount of grants to grandcarers over this budget and across the forward estimates. That is the first point to make. I think it is incumbent on any government to look critically at what it does and to make sure that it is best delivering for the cohort that is targeted—in this case, grandcarers. Although I acknowledge that there is a lot of demand across the state, this is a national issue. It is not only a state issue. The social security payments that are paid to grandcarers have been a political issue as well. I make no apology for taking a critical look at what we are doing now in partnership with the services that are doing that work and making sure that we have a robust evaluation and plan going forward so that the spend is targeted and does the job that it is designed to do. I fully expect to do that with Wanslea. I am not critical of Wanslea. It is not unusual for services such as Wanslea to have a service agreement with a finite period. It does not mean that it will not be re-funded, but government is obliged to have a fresh look at that and make sure that the project is meeting its objectives.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Thursday, 23 May 2019]

p488b-515a

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Mrs Lisa O'Malley; Ms Cassandra Rowe

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I am still trying to get an answer for the previous question. Does the minister have a time frame for when she will complete this review? Will it be decided before the end of December, when the agreement runs out?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I could ask Helen Nys to answer the question, but she just told me what she was going to say; that is, we are expecting to make some announcements in the second half of the year in partnership with Wanslea. The department will be giving good notice of any changes to its funding contracts that occur as a result of this review.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I thank the minister. I appreciate that. The minister referred to the increase in grandcarer support grants, but, as the minister answered to my earlier question, that will depend on how many grandcarers apply for that funding. That line item is not obviously going to Wanslea and other services. As the minister pointed out, it is on another page of the budget. The increase in grandcarer support grants will be only if grandparents access that; and, if they do not, we will end up with the balances we have ended up with previously. I asked the minister a question about the grandparents respite program, which is not a line item in this budget. I appreciate that the minister said she would take it back to the department and talk to it. I want to find out whether the minister has managed to find some money to fund that respite program, which gives grandcarers in our society a little bit of extra help. It would be very disappointing if they were not able to get that. If the minister has found that money, and is able to give them some guarantee that it will not be cut in the next budget, they could have some certainty.

[4.40 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: The \$125 000 that contributes to the respite program will be part of the review that is being undertaken at the moment. As I said in answer to the previous question, we expect to finalise that in the second half of the year, and well before the end of the year.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The budget line item for grandcarers support grants has remained the same; the respite program has just been removed completely. Where will the minister find that \$125 000 for the respite program?

Ms S.F. McGURK: It will be funded internally within the department. We inherited a budget in which the previous government funded the \$125 000 for only a finite period. When it came to the end and there was understandable angst about that, we committed to reinstate that funding, and the department funded it internally.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I appreciate that. This is the government's third budget, and again it is missing, so it would be great if the minister could set an example and show us how it is done with funding for grandcarers. The grandcarers are obviously saving the state a lot of money, because the children are not going into state care. Has there been any direction or influence from the department to make sure grandparents do not put their grandchildren into state care or access the foster program, or is that option available to grandcarers—that is, to get into the foster program?

Ms S.F. McGURK: There is often some confusion about, for want of a better word, the different status of grandcarers. Some grandparents are caring for children because their own children and their own families are not able to look after them. They are doing so because the Department of Communities has made an assessment that the children are at risk in their own family and meet the thresholds of coming into care. They go before the Children's Court and establish that those children should come under provisional care orders until they are 18, and they are then legally in the care of the director general of the Department of Communities. It is then the department's job to assess the availability of foster carers to care for those children. The ideal is that there are kinship or family carers—members of the children's extended family—who are able to take up that responsibility.

I was at a celebration of the Foster Care Association's fortieth anniversary this morning, and we heard from a number of different foster carers, including some kinship or family carers who had been through that system. The benefits of being a carer under that system are that they get some financial and departmental support in services and the like. The other side of that coin is that the department has a responsibility to be involved in the decisions about those children, and often grandparents will not want that to be the case. That is for children who are formally under the care of the CEO, but whose grandparents are the formal foster parents. They are essentially foster carers or family carers. They are given the same amount of financial and other support by the department, but they are still assigned a case manager by the department.

There are other grandcarers throughout the state whose grandchildren are not able to be cared for by their own family but who may not meet the threshold of harm prescribed under the act. Nevertheless, the grandparents feel that the children are not able to be cared for by their own parents, and so there is an informal arrangement of care. That means that the children are placed with those grandcarers. They are not eligible for the same amount of family support, but on the other hand they are able to exercise a lot more discretion in relation to those children, because it is essentially an arrangement within their own family. That explains the difference between the levels of support that are given in the department, and there is a lot of public confusion about that.

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Having said that, one of the pieces of work being done by the department is to try to evaluate whether the placements might be more stable if we gave grandcarers more support, and whether the children would have better outcomes than if we simply said, “You’re with your grandparents now; you’re okay, we’ll leave you”, and just stepped away. In fact, it can be very difficult for grandcarers, for all the obvious reasons. Some work is being done within the department to make sure we provide those family carers with support, if they need it. There is no doubt that, across the state, a lot of grandcarers, or great-aunts and uncles and the like—extended family—care for children in informal arrangements. They are the recipients of the grants we are talking about here under the grandcarers supports that Wanslea helps manage. They are more informal arrangements, and I understand that those people are the unsung heroes, doing an amazing job. They are often dealing with issues with their own children, whether they are drug or alcohol issues, or the children are imprisoned or have mental health issues, and for whatever reason are unable to care for their own children. We provide them with some level of support. I understand that it is not enough, but it is a level of support.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I appreciate the minister’s answer. When a grandcarer applies for these grants, are they given information so that they can be aware that they can take the foster option if they choose? Is it up to the state, so the state takes them under its care and then they can be fostered? Some grandcarers do it that way, and others do not.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I might get assistant director general Jackie Tang to talk a bit more confidently about the thresholds of harm, and the criteria that are assessed under the act by the department and then presided over by the Children’s Court.

Mrs J. Tang: Fundamentally, it is not about a parent or grandparent asking for a child to go into the foster care system. The child’s situation has to be that they are at significant risk of harm, and a determination is made on whether the state should intervene. Therefore, all decisions about that child are then effectively taken on by the parental role of the state, as opposed to the family. It is not a choice that a family has. I hope that it would be the last resort that a grandparent would think that they had to go to the state and say, “I can’t care for my grandchild, on the basis that I do not have this care”. We absolutely do not want to be in that situation. For the grandcarers, it is really about that respite and giving them some time out and that support. There is quite distinct decision-making around the children, for different reasons. The last thing we want is for the numbers to increase. It is actually how we get children out of the system and reunify them with their families. A lot of the work with children who are currently in the system is around that earlier intervention—that support that we provide to the families who are in the system—to safely reduce the number that come in, and to get them home safely. Doing that is the focus of a lot of the recent funding for children who are currently in care and those who are in imminent danger of coming into care.

[4.50 pm]

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I totally understand. I am not talking about the grandparents not being able to care for the children. They are taking it on because, sadly, their children cannot. In our society that is happening more and more. I have personal friends who have become grandcarers. I have met with a number of them and they are struggling to cover their own medical and prescription bills, which people need as they get older and, all of a sudden, they are now responsible for their grandchildren. They are getting very little assistance. They are generally on a pension and had no plan to have this extra burden and cost at this time of their life. The kids are going to school and they do not want them to suffer because they do not have the latest iPad, iPhone or shoes. Grandparents are going without their medicine and not doing the things that they should be doing in their retirement years. I am trying to find a way that they get access to the funds they need. Whether the child is a foster child or under the care of the grandparent, it should have every support and the money available. Because they are not a foster child, they get less financial assistance. I do not think that is a good balance for the child, let alone the poor grandparent who has taken on that extra burden. I am asking this because I am aware of some grandparents who have fostered their own grandchildren so they have access to another source of revenue. Why is there a gap and some who do not get that? Is it that they are not aware that they can go down that path, or is it that they take on the children but do not tell the department that they are in desperate need and they have taken on a grandchild because the parents are not fit?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will reiterate the distinction I made before. Under the Children and Community Services Act there is a threshold of harm by which the department assesses whether children are at risk. It is difficult to make that assessment. If that threshold is met, the department will make the decision to take the child, not into the care of the extended family, but into the care of the department. It will go to the Children’s Court and say that it believes that the level of harm has been substantiated and the child is at threat either of harm or future harm and that the threshold has been met. This is a simplistic outline, but, if provisional orders or orders until 18 are made by the Children’s Court, the department will decide who the best person to care for that child is. It may be the grandparent, but it may not be. That is an example of when the decision is taken out of the family’s hands. It will be the director general’s decision, delegated through the department. Part of the department’s responsibility, when it provides resources, is to have ongoing involvement in the care of the child. It provides some assistance, but it requires some involvement. A good example would be if the grandparents decide to go overseas on a holiday.

They would need to get the department's permission and notify the department that they are going to do that. A level of harm needs to be substantiated. A court order needs to be made by the Children's Court, and the department will decide who the appropriate carer is. If it is a functional extended family member, it is quite likely that they would be given priority. That process takes a lot of control out of the extended family's hands.

On the other hand, if the arrangement is informal, the threshold of harm may not be met that would justify a provisional or longer term order being made by the Children's Court. If the threshold of harm is substantiated and the child comes into the care of the department, it might be the department's view that the extended family—in this case, the grandcarer—is not the best person to care for the child. With the support comes a lot of involvement. I think that is little understood in some of these discussions. There are a lot of kinship carers, but they are essentially foster carers by another name. They get a range of supports from department. I understand that people who have informal arrangements feel they do not get the same level of support but perhaps that threshold of harm has not been met. If it has been met, the grandparent may not be judged to be the most appropriate carer, or there may be a level of involvement by the department that is unwanted. I hope that has explained the distinction.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I learnt a lot just then, so I thank the minister. If we are giving grants to grandcarers, sometimes those grandcarers are not even aware of them. Their grandchildren could meet that criteria. Is it brought to their attention that that option is available? I am not saying it should be an option. They are not even aware because they are in crisis mode themselves.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will make two points about that. The grandcarers could get advice from the Department of Communities about their circumstances and their options to best meet the needs of the child. That brings me to the second point; that is, the primary focus of the act and the work of the department is the interests of the child. It has to use its best judgement about how to establish the risk of harm and the best interests for the life of the child. What can be very difficult for families is that, although we need to acknowledge risk and respond to risk and the possibility of harm, all the evidence shows us that children need to be with their families. That is fundamental. Balancing those two things is the tricky work of the department and everyone working in the child protection system. To answer the member's question, if there is any uncertainty or concern about that, I am sure someone at a local district office could give a grandcarer some advice about what this process would mean.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I want to go back to the grandcarers assistance program. The minister mentioned that it was under review. In her ministerial statement on 13 June 2018, she stated that the department was currently doing the review of the grandcarers assistance program. That review has been going on for nearly a year. Is it due to be completed at the end of June—that would have been 12 months—or is it due to be completed in mid-December?

Ms S.F. McGURK: In my previous answer this afternoon, I did not mean to say mid-December. I meant to say shortly and before December. I understand that there has been some frustration about this. I do not want grandcarers in Western Australia, whether they are in the formal childcare system or if it is an informal arrangement, to feel unsupported. We will do what we can. The review is designed to ensure that the money will go where it is needed and provide the best support we can, given that, unfortunately, there is a lot of demand in this area.

Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY: I refer to the fourth line item of the service summary on page 447 of budget paper No 2, "Preventing and Responding to Family and Domestic Violence". Can the minister outline any new measures the McGowan government is taking to support victims of family and domestic violence?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I can do that.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The minister could just send out a press release.

[5.00 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: The member for Moore can look at my media statements, and I hope that he does that. I am actually quite proud of the effort that our government is putting into the problem. We talked about the south west. We know that domestic violence is a major driver of family stress. It is terrible for women and their children to be impacted by domestic violence.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am just thinking of your voice, minister.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I know. You are only thinking of my interests. I understand that.

We took to the 2017 state election a series of commitments on stopping family and domestic violence. The recent funding commitment delivered on a number of those commitments. One of those is funding for two one-stop hubs. One will be located in Mirrabooka and the other will be located in Kalgoorlie. We are working with the WA Police Force and the Departments of Education; Health; Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries; and Justice to ensure that we have a much more integrated response. Importantly, these hubs are an alternative for women or people experiencing domestic violence to get advice about these issues. The Victorian government has rolled out

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17 of these hubs under a service called The Orange Door. It has taken one approach. When we were deciding what model to adopt, we asked Curtin University to do some work with the department to evaluate what was set up in other places and how effective it was.

We spoke to some members of vulnerable communities. The member for Mirrabooka must have heard us speaking about her electorate; when she hears something, wherever she is, she comes running. Some cohorts—it may be anyone—may not be ready or prepared to go to the police and make inquiries about the domestic violence that they are experiencing. They may go to refuges or women's services, which are able to provide general advice as well as somewhere to go if they leave their current home. They may or may not go to their doctor. We need an alternative place for women to come forward. That is one need that the hub is responding to. The other is to either co-locate services or ensure that there is an integrated response to dealing with domestic violence. I have spoken to refuge workers who are working with an outreach service and women who are saying it takes them some time and a number of inquiries before they make a decision about what to do. That might involve taking out a restraining order, leaving their house, leaving their relationship or going to the police. It might mean they get some advice about understanding the different manifestations of domestic violence. There is growing public awareness that if left unchecked, the early signs of controlling abusive behaviour can escalate. People have a right to understand what is going on.

As I said, we are funding two one-stop hubs to the tune of \$11.7 million as part of our election commitment. We have also funded the refuges, which we have already announced. We will also trial electronic monitoring of offenders. There is a significant contribution towards that in the budget. We will look at family violence offenders, people who have breached orders a number of times, and high-risk offenders when deciding where to stage the electronic monitoring trials, and extend it under this budget allocation. That should be really interesting. A suite of measures will be available to help deal with high-risk situations. We also allocated funding to increase the capacity of the police department. From my experience over the past two and a half years, the police are really putting their shoulders to the wheel in making sure that they understand what is happening with domestic violence and responding to it effectively. We can always do more. It is a big police force. It is an overwhelmingly male police force. We need to increase their capacity. There was also an allocation of over \$30 million for protocols within police in the recent budget. That brings the total new spend on top of previous budget allocations to \$52 million.

There is a lot to do. I have spoken about this quite a bit. In addition to those specific announcements, we are also working with the sector on a 10-year strategy. That can sound bureaucratic but, in fact, there is a lot to do so we want to make sure that we are organised, we prioritise that work and we bring best practice to that work. Those pillars around which we are developing the strategy are based on making sure that victims are safe and perpetrators are held to account. We will work with men. We have a responsive justice system and we will work to prevent the violence happening in the first place. We also want to ensure that the services within government and the community sector that we are funding are supported as well as they can be to do the work that they need to do, particularly around women's refuges. Anyone who has been to any of them would be in awe of the work that they do with so little. They provide incredible support and capacity. I know we all feel that. This is important work. How can we support the sector to better deliver good outcomes over time?

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 446 of budget paper No 2. There are a number of points pertaining to significant issues impacting the agency. Paragraph 12 relates to the ongoing implementation of machinery-of-government changes that will see regional executive directors appointed within the state. Is this covered by an expense item or is that part of the catch-all community services item? Is there an area in which that money is allocated to provide for these new regional directors?

Ms S.F. McGURK: My advice is that they are attributed across all the services, not within one portfolio. Obviously, it was designed to gain the benefits of economies of scale across the Department of Communities. That was one of our objectives.

Mr R.S. LOVE: In terms of the functionality of these positions, who will they report to exactly?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will ask the director general to answer.

[Ms J.M. Freeman took the chair.]

Ms M.J. Andrews: Six regional director positions have been established, very much reflecting, as the minister indicated, the intention for Communities to see more seniority, decision-making, and, importantly, collaboration in the regions, working with other managers and directors in the other government agencies. The district leadership groups that the member would be familiar with is one of the key forums in which the regional directors are working across government. Six of those regional director positions are established under the community structure and four of them have been substantively filled so far.

The member asked who they report to. They report to the assistant directors general for metropolitan and regional, so Jackie Tang and Rachael Green.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The budget papers state that regional executive directors will be appointed in each region of the state. Is that referring to the regions under the Regional Development Commissions Act—that is, the midwest, the wheatbelt and the south west—in the generally accepted structure of regional development?

[5.10 pm]

Ms M.J. Andrews: I thank the member for the question. The question of regional boundaries is one we are grappling with across the whole sector. There is certainly going to be merit in getting greater alignment across the public sector. At this stage, the origins of the regional boundaries have been in individual agencies over time. The district leadership groups I mentioned before are becoming a really good vehicle for overcoming some of the constraints with that. The origins of the Department of Communities' regional breakup really came out of the previous Department for Child Protection and Family Support, but we are working with other government agencies, so those things matter less. We are really starting to focus in broader terms on working locally to deliver the needs of those communities.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Could the minister outline to me the responsibilities of the regional executive directors?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will hand over to Rachael Green, who is responsible for the regional services.

Mrs R. Green: The regional executive directors have a responsibility for service delivery over a geographic area. Six are currently appointed across social housing and child protection. They are looking at service integration and working with our stakeholders. When we talk about shifting our responses to young people, families and communities, there are more resources and they can move with them to get better outcomes for young people, families and communities within that geographic region.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am trying to understand the level of responsibility and influence these directors will have. For example, the member for Vasse was talking about child protection in the south west and whether there will be a person stationed in a particular area. Will they have a role in apportioning some of the expenditure and personnel within their region? Will there be communication backwards and forwards about where there might be gaps that need to be filled with further information? Will there be any transparency around their roles? Will people in the community know that these people are somehow responsible at a regional level? How will these directors interact with the communities, and what expectation will community members have of the influences they will have on their behalf?

Ms S.F. McGURK: That is quite a broad question the member asked. I think there is a comment about the district leadership groups. As the director general said, they have an opportunity across not only government agencies but also community organisations and the community itself, depending on the make-up of the community, to have input into some of the strategic questions for our department. Also, importantly, there can be a much more integrated approach to priority areas, and we have seen that starting to work well. It seems obvious, but that sort of coordinated focus across a range of different stakeholders and different community areas has failed to date. That is one level of accountability of the district directors. I hand over to the director general to make any other comments she wants to make.

Ms M.J. Andrews: This is probably one of those areas that applies to the formation of the Department of Communities. Of course, we are still going through the process of settling the structure, integrating the systems across communities and putting in place what I think the member is pointing at. One of the clear intentions is getting the right level of authority and decision-making happening at a regional level. There is a very clear intention in the formation of Communities to move from centralised decision-making to more localised decision-making. That intention is clear. We are still in the process of giving effect to it, but it is most definitely the intention of Communities for us to be effective, so decisions are being made much closer to where the individuals, families and communities are. The decisions are informed by their priorities and needs and they are also being made in a way that are much more purposeful and collaborative across the sector with partner organisations, traditional owner groups and all that. We do not have all the arrangements in place yet. That is exactly what we are working on now in the formation of Communities.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I have a further question, then I will leave it. This question has to do with the appointment of the person who is the executive director, I guess. Is this the appointment of an externally sourced person or of someone working in the various service provision areas of the department who is already locally based and who might be put into that position? For instance, in Geraldton, in the midwest, might it be the person in charge of Homeswest or housing or something at the moment? Would that person then take on that role or would a fresh person be appointed through a process of advertising or some other process? Can the minister explain how those people will be recruited and how the job description is explained to them?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I hand over to the director general.

Ms M.J. Andrews: As the member would expect, and quite properly so, these positions have gone through a proper establishment process with the Public Sector Commission to confirm their level and responsibilities. The job descriptions are available to look at and they very clearly articulate what the responsibilities are. In those is a more detailed articulation of what I have just been speaking about. They certainly do not say, “This is a housing manager”, in fact, quite the opposite. They are senior leadership positions, so the job description and responsibilities are articulated in terms of what would be expected in a leadership role and they speak to the intention of what we have just been talking about—that is, the role they will play in the regions. The process we go through for recruitment and appointment is, if you like, the well-established one across the public sector, which in essence is a merit-based selection process, the merit being charged against its articulation in the job description. Some appointments might be made from within Communities and some might be made from outside, but there will be a very deliberate effort through the recruitment process to make sure that we reach out to all potential candidates who would be suitable for those new roles.

The CHAIR: Member for Belmont.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Just before that —

The CHAIR: You said that was your last question.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It was my last question, but the answer indicated there was some information I could access about the job description and the key areas of performance that candidates will be expected to attain. I wonder whether that could be provided to me by way of supplementary information.

Ms M.J. Andrews: Yes, I am very happy to do that.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I understand the member is asking for the job descriptions for regional district directors at the Department of Communities.

[Supplementary Information No B34.]

Ms C.M. ROWE: I refer to service 3, “Earlier Intervention and Family Support Services” in the service summary on page 447 of budget paper No 2, volume 2. I would be grateful if the minister could explain what types of early intervention support services are available to vulnerable Western Australians.

[5.20 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: A range of different programs are offered through the department, and under this government significant funding has been put in place to the Department of Communities for family support. That funding is to make sure that we are working earlier in the pipeline, as I have described previously in these proceedings, to try to give families proper support and assistance, make sure that children are safe—that is a given—and that the assessment criteria or benchmark does not change. However, we try to work with families earlier so that children can stay with their families and those families and their children can thrive. As part of the early intervention and family support strategy, the government is providing about \$19 million in 2019–20 to fund the ongoing operation of the Aboriginal in-home support service, the family support network and the intensive family support service. I know that they all sound quite similar, so to reiterate, one is Aboriginal in-home support; one is a family support network that links people up with networks of services external to that provider; and the final one is intensive work with the family, or case management, if you like. These tenders were awarded in 2018, and they more than trebled the number of community service organisations delivering early intervention for families. Significantly, seven non-Aboriginal community sector organisations are working in partnership with 11 Aboriginal-controlled organisations and Yorgum Aboriginal Corporation. They are providing intensive family support services across nine of the delivery regions. All this work is being done in 10 service locations and over 60 per cent of the population of regional Western Australia has access to these types of services. As of 20 February 2019, those early intervention and family support services overall were working with over 3 500 children, a significant number of children. Obviously some will be from the same families. All those early intervention and family support services are operational. As I indicated, there has been a big direction to either award those contracts to Aboriginal-controlled organisations to do that work, or, when that is not possible, have existing organisations partner with Aboriginal-controlled organisations to build up the capacity of those organisations so that, importantly, Aboriginal families are working with Aboriginal organisations. Western Australia is a little behind other jurisdictions in that area. I was able to go to Queensland recently and talk to the state government about its child protection work, including the work that it is doing with the Aboriginal community in building up the capacity of Aboriginal-controlled organisations, to support Aboriginal-controlled organisations and to better provide for those vulnerable families.

I acknowledge that an amount of this work had already commenced when we came to government. However, it is important that we continue to re-evaluate what we are doing to make sure that it still has the right settings of our current government’s priorities. One of those priorities is to ensure that we are working in partnership with Aboriginal-controlled organisations with the Aboriginal community and, as I said, that we draw on the best

evidence-based practice and we make sure that where we can, as much as possible, we are evaluating the outcomes of that work over time and we give those contracts that we have awarded to community organisations some security of funding. In all of these cases they were five-year contracts in accordance with our current policy to give security of funding. With those significant contracts we are able to give a big amount of money to early intervention work to partner with Aboriginal-controlled organisations, to make sure that we are looking as much as possible at outcomes for those families, and that we are giving some security of funding for those organisations. I think we all hope that the dividends pay off. I was in Geraldton recently and met with Mission Australia, which is doing some of that work in Geraldton. I want to say that what I saw was superficial, but only because I heard only four or five cases. It was heartening to hear the work that that organisation is doing with the local community to work with families who have children who may be at risk of harm, and we are confident that if we work with those families earlier, the children will be able to stay with their families and those families will get back on their feet. It was good to hear those stories in Geraldton.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That statement was largely around Aboriginal children and the needs of that community. Has the minister's department had any specific response to the crisis in suicides in the Kimberley that has led to, in recent years, a government inquiry, a parliamentary inquiry and a coroner's inquiry? Is there a specific reaction that the minister's department makes in trying to address those outcomes and the difficulties pointed to by those two inquiries?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am happy to answer that question, but I do wonder what budget line item it relates to or how it relates to the previous question.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That was supplementary to your discussion.

The CHAIR: That was a supplementary question to the other question. It is fine; there is no standing order that states you have to have a budget line item. It is a general discussion and a protocol, but it is a further question.

[5.30 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: Thank you for that, Chair. The member may have seen that yesterday the government released a statement of intent, led by the Minister for Mental Health; Deputy Premier, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and me. It outlined our responses to the coronial inquest into the 13 suicides, and also the "Learnings from the message stick" parliamentary inquiry. The statement of intent worked through a number of recommendations made as a result of both inquiries. Essentially, it said that we want to work in partnership with local communities to decide how we best respond, and we will continue to do that over the next six months and let the public and Parliament know how we are going before the end of the year. I will make a couple of other comments about that. It is important that we recognise that our response to youth suicide is in partnership with the communities within which these tragedies occurred. That is not to say that we do not think that this is an urgent issue. It is, it is a tragic issue, and one even the most casual observer would agree with. Firstly, I want to place on record my sorrow that we have to be dealing with this at all. We need to work in partnership with the communities to talk to its leadership and the community itself to really understand what will be effective in our response.

One of the other comments in that statement of intent acknowledges that suicide prevention is not just about a mental health response. Although this forms part of the work that we need to do, our clinical responses need to be effective. Obviously, that is a challenge in regional and remote Western Australia, but one that needs to be met. Importantly, our mental health responses need to be culturally informed. We, as a government, and all government agencies have a long way to go to make sure that we adopt best practice and fully understand what is happening in Aboriginal culture where this occurs. In responding to these issues, we need to ensure that we marry, if you like, the best of our understanding of traditional and modern cultural issues for Aboriginal communities, with western medicine or a western response. Suicide prevention issues are very difficult generally, but that has to be a part of our response as well. Finally, we should view suicide prevention in terms of not only a mental health response, but also an understanding that it is about an individual's wellbeing, their sense of hope and their connection to culture. I know that that term is bandied around a lot, but it does not take anything away from the importance of government understanding that this situation has arisen because these communities have experienced cultural displacement and trauma over a number of generations. We are now seeing the result of that. Unless we really understand that and respond to it, our responses will be superficial and ineffective.

They were the elements of our statement of intent yesterday, and we have committed to work with local communities to come up with a further response by the end of the year. The responses that I have heard from Aboriginal communities just through the media—there may have been others that I have not heard—is that this is welcomed. We all understand that this is an urgent issue, but we need the response to be effective.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Can I have some clarification before I ask my question? On page 460, in the table outlining the details of controlled grants and subsidies, does the line item "Other Grants" come under the Department of

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Thursday, 23 May 2019]

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Communities? It is right at the very bottom of the table and kind of floating on its own. Is that under the minister's portfolio?

Ms S.F. McGURK: Sorry, I think it is a blend. It is a combined figure between me and Minister Murray. Perhaps I will take the question and then I can let the member know whether I can answer it.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: In the previous budget there was ongoing funding for this line item. I have two questions. The first is why has ongoing funding disappeared? The second question is —

The CHAIR: Member, is it in this current budget?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Yes. In the last budget there was funding for it and now there is no funding.

The CHAIR: You cannot talk about the last budget. You have to refer to these budget papers.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: There is no funding in the forward estimates for this grant program. It looks as though that grant program has been cut. Can the minister explain why it has been cut?

The CHAIR: Does it say zero in the line item?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Yes. That is my first question. In 2017–18, there was an allocation of \$991 000, but over \$3 million was spent, which is an overspend of over \$2 million. Can I get a list of what grants were included in that overspend of \$2 million?

The CHAIR: Can the member tell me the page number again?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I am referring to page 460.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I might answer the first part of the member's question, but I wonder whether the second part of her question contradicts the ruling of the Chair, because the member is asking why there is a discrepancy between the actual 2017–18 budget and what was previously allocated.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I will withdraw that part of the question and just ask for a list of the grants for 2017–18.

Ms S.F. McGURK: My understanding is that "Other Grants" relates to one-off discretionary funding that was made available. Examples of that in 2017–18 were \$120 000 for a Hong Kong youth exchange program; \$685 000 for hardship utility grant scheme third party assessments; \$150 000 for the Men's Sheds of WA; and \$683 000 for family and domestic violence accommodation. Those discretionary grants were awarded by the department and accessed through those funds. I have also been given some examples of discretionary grants that were funded this year but through appropriations. For instance, the Commissioner for Children and Young People was given —

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Sorry, was there no funding for the line item this year?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am giving examples that were funded through a general appropriation: \$70 000 was given to the Commissioner for Children and Young People for a survey to monitor children and young people's wellbeing; \$70 000 was given to the City of Kalgoorlie–Boulder for the link project; \$140 000 was given to the Jacaranda Community Centre; and \$75 000 was given to Men's Sheds of WA. A range of relatively small grants are provided and the department funds those through general appropriations.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Am I able to get as supplementary information a list of those grants for 2017–18, and also the ones that the minister just read out that have been provided this year?

[5.40 pm]

Ms S.F. McGURK: I will provide a list of discretionary grants under my portfolios that were ordered by the Department of Communities for 2017–18 and 2018–19.

[*Supplementary Information No B35.*]

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I thank the minister for that; I really appreciate it. The ongoing discretionary grants fund is obviously not available now. It has been reallocated under a different line item. Is there ongoing funding over the forward estimates for that?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I am just understanding what the process is internally. Could the member please repeat the question?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: There is now nothing in the forward estimates for "Other Grants". The minister has said that it is now coming under other line items—I think she listed a few, including the Commissioner for Children and Young People. Can the minister tell me where that funding is for these other grants, or will no more discretionary grant funds be available?

Ms S.F. McGURK: The department is undertaking a review of its grants projects at the moment, but as I indicated for 2018–19, there is a capacity for us to draw from general appropriations as we did for that year. There does need

to be some discretion within the department. Sometimes there are some applications or demands that have merit and need to be considered by the department that have not been allocated within the prescribed budget. The process will be similar to 2018–19. Given that, the Department of Communities is undertaking a review of that process internally now.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The department is reviewing the grants program. Can the minister tell me when it started and when it expects to finish that review? To cut \$3 million out of the budget—it is a lot of money per year. When did that review start, when is it due to be finished, and what is the cost of these reviews? There seem to be quite a few reviews going on.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I was just getting some advice from Brad Jolly. I might get him to answer that question.

Mr B.P. JOLLY: I thank the member for the question. The review that the minister has just referred to is looking at the department's historical expenditure on the grants. As the minister has touched on previously, a number of these grants have been funded on an ad hoc basis, where we have had the budget capacity through underspends in program areas to be able to address an application for funding that aligns with departmental priorities and government priorities more broadly, but there has not been a great deal of visibility around those in a budgetary sense. The review is seeking to look at historical expenditure on grants in each portfolio area that is covered by the department and to then make an allocation for that in a budget line, so that the allocation for grants becomes quite visible and transparent for each portfolio.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Thank you. I appreciate the explanation of the review. There is no money in the budget for that, so obviously that will be updated in the midyear review. Again, when did the review start, when is it due to finish, and how much will the review cost?

Ms S.F. McGURK: The review is being undertaken internally. I agree; there is quite a bit of work being done in the department. Some of that is a result of having a new director general; also, the machinery of government has resulted in a relatively new structure for the department. That has required the department to continue to critically evaluate what it is doing, and I think the description of what is happening in our regional effort is a good example of that. I also wanted to make the point that I do not think good practice is a set-and-forget in any of these budget allocations or any of that work. The process of review is being undertaken internally. I cannot say that a finite time period has already been allocated. I will talk further to the director general about when we expect that to finish. Mr Jolly has explained what has been funded internally in a more flexible manner. It is good practice to step back and say: Is there a trend in this spending? Do we need to make permanent allocations to areas within existing line items? If we look at how these grants have been awarded, are they genuinely one-off, but we do need some discretionary funds there so that we can respond to needs as they arise throughout the year? To answer the member's question, at this stage, we do not have a finite time, but I am sure that the director general will take this on board. I do not know how many weeks she has been in the job, but I have certainly done my best to fill her in-tray with requests.

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to page 450 of budget paper No 2, volume 2 and the heading "Homelessness Support Services", as well as to the asset investment program on page 456. Are there any plans for funding in 2019–20 to address an absence of crisis and short-term accommodation in and around the Busselton area?

Ms S.F. McGURK: I thank the member for the question. I know the member has been concerned about this. In fact, there is a visibility of homelessness across the state, and we understand that. It does not make it any less real, and I appreciate local members are responding to needs in their community. We already fund a number of services in the south west that the member will be aware of, as we do throughout the state. We need to make sure that those services are doing a good job for those clients they are funded for, that they are doing the work we expect of them, and that critical evaluation of that is occurring all the time. I mentioned earlier the policy that we took to the election to have funding arrangements accounted for by outcomes rather than outputs. The outcome of homelessness services is a good example of that. What are the short-term expectations and what are the medium and long-term outcomes for some of those clients appearing at those services? That is a piece of work that is being done by the department, but importantly with the sector as well, which we fund. The second piece of work is identifying that, as I mentioned with family and domestic violence, there is a lot of work to be done. Unless we are organised and strategic about doing that work, we will not be effective. Again, these are some of the more vulnerable people in our community. They have difficult, complex needs that are not easily met. If their issues could be easily resolved, they would have been resolved by now. We are looking at a strategy to try to do a number of things to identify the need across the state. The Centre for Social Impact at UWA did a study to inform the beginning of that work: What does homelessness look like across the state? How does it manifest? What is the data? What are our sources? What are good services? What is the kind of pipeline of need, for instance, for street-present people? What are the drivers of some of that homelessness? What are the other needs of those people? If we could give them a roof over their head, would that fix the problem or do they need to link with other services? What is good practice in meeting some of those needs? Significantly, we are doing that work in what is called the Supporting Communities Forum. That is the peak body. The director general is working with the

president of the Western Australian Council of Social Service and the head of Ruah Community Services, Debra Zanella, to lead that homelessness strategy work.

[5.50 pm]

There has been a whole series of consultations—partly public work but mostly within the sector—that the director general could speak about if the member is interested. Essentially, we are trying to prioritise our work and get organised. It can sound a bit bureaucratic when we say our response to homelessness is a strategy. We announced that strategy in the middle of Homelessness Week last year, I think, and people said, “Oh, yeah, another piece of work”, but I genuinely believe that if we want to be effective, we have to be organised. Quite a lot of good work is being done now, but because there is still unmet need, our gaze is continually at the unmet need and we are not really able to acknowledge the good work that is being done. We need to understand and learn from the good work that is being done.

Some of our best work that is being done is in the community sector through collaborations. Organisations that have traditionally competed for funding are working collectively to get good outcomes for homeless people, and they are getting some really good results. There is still a lot of work to do. The member has probably seen the state statistics that show that over 9 000 people experience homelessness on any one night in WA. To come back to the south west, we are hoping through that strategy to prioritise areas of need, both geographically and in demographic terms, and look at how we can meet those areas of need. Finally, we are looking at some of the drivers of homelessness. Domestic violence is a good example; it is the leading cause of homelessness amongst women and their children. Obviously, we are trying to do better in our responses to DV.

Ms L. METTAM: I appreciate the challenge that the sector faces in this respect. Recently, I had an incident at the office when we were trying to assist somebody with emergency housing, and it got to the point at which we were contacting different refuges and emergency houses across the state. In this circumstance, we contacted Entrypoint Perth emergency housing. We were going to bus the lady to Perth, but Entrypoint does not take referrals over the phone, only in person. As a result of this situation, the lady in question became so stressed out that we ended up having to call an ambulance and she stayed the night in hospital. I guess it is more of a comment, but as part of this challenge, when looking at the immediate needs in Busselton and other areas, I encourage the government to also look at how we can better interlink with other services, even if they are outside the region. I understood there was potentially room in Bunbury, but that was an issue as well for another range of reasons. I have written to the minister on this matter and I certainly accept that she is passionate about this area. It has perhaps become an issue across the state, but there is no emergency housing in Busselton and this is a growing issue. We cannot send someone to the neighbouring city or even to Perth on a bus, so there is obviously a major issue.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I understand the dilemma that local members and members of the community face when they see that unmet need, and as the member for Fremantle, I feel it very keenly. I see it a lot in my local community. I also know that we are providing a lot of services. Combined with our domestic violence spend, as a state government we have put in over \$90 million. That does not include the federal government contribution. We have put a lot of money into this already. I understand there is a lot of demand, but, as I said, we want to be effective. We want to make sure that if we have extra money, we are putting it where there is the most need and that these services are best placed to provide not only short-term relief but also the proper supports to get people back on their feet. The community sector group that is trying to address this issue calls itself the Alliance to End Homelessness, because it is looking at other jurisdictions that have been very ambitious in this area. I think we should be ambitious to apply the best thinking available to provide supports for those people. Some of it is not easy and I know people's tolerance and patience with this is not always what we would like, but they are complex issues. The Premier has homelessness in his electorate as well. We all face it in our areas. That does not take away the need. There is still a challenge there.

Ms L. METTAM: I have another question about Busselton. I refer to the table on page 460, “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies”, and youth support grants. We have only four minutes, but I am wondering whether any funding is allocated to the Busselton youth precinct. There has been a growing number of incidents involving youth at risk at this centre since it was opened. It has, basically, attracted at-risk youth and about 54 young people engaged with youth justice.

Ms S.F. McGURK: It is not my portfolio, I am sorry. Is the member talking about the youth services support grants on page 460?

Ms L. METTAM: Yes.

Ms S.F. McGURK: It relates to Minister Tinley, who is the Minister for Youth.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Thursday, 23 May 2019]

p488b-515a

Chair; Mrs Alyssa Hayden; Ms Simone McGurk; Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Shane Love; Amber-Jade Sanderson;
Mrs Lisa O'Malley; Ms Cassandra Rowe

Mr R.S. LOVE: While we have only a minute left, I wonder whether the Department of Communities has any interaction with Men's Sheds of WA and any plans to support it in any way? I know it is not a budget item, but we have a minute. It is service 1, Community Services.

Ms S.F. McGURK: We provide \$150 000 to Men's Sheds of WA, as the peak body.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Is there future funding for that?

Ms S.F. McGURK: It is continuing.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Does that go to Men's Sheds of WA or to the Australian —

Ms S.F. McGURK: It goes to Men's Sheds of WA.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is not to the mob over east.

Ms S.F. McGURK: It is not to the mob over east.

Mr R.S. LOVE: They are in conflict with the Western Australian association.

Ms S.F. McGURK: We have had it with the mob over east!

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The discretionary grants are funding Men's Sheds of WA, as the minister listed. Is that tied up with the money in the forward estimates that is under review?

Ms S.F. McGURK: That funding for the Men's Sheds is being converted to the sector support program through which we fund peak bodies such as the Western Australian Council of Social Service, the Women's Council for Domestic and Family Violence Services and Shelter WA. There is a range of peak bodies and it is getting converted to that.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: None of us wants to upset our men's sheds.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Are there any plans to increase funding to men's sheds, because they do a tremendous job?

Ms S.F. McGURK: They do a tremendous job and I would like to give extra money to their peak body. I would like to give money to lots of different organisations, member. It will be amongst the considerations in the future.

The appropriation was recommended.

Meeting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm