

ENERGY — COST-OF-LIVING RELIEF

621. Ms M.M. QUIRK to the Minister for Energy:

I refer to the Cook Labor government's ongoing commitment to support Western Australian families to manage cost-of-living pressures.

- (1) Can the minister advise the house on how this government is providing direct financial assistance to all Western Australian households through our state-owned energy companies?
- (2) Can the minister advise the house on how this government's record of supporting households compares with the Liberal and National parties?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON replied:

- (1)–(2) Thank you, member for Landsdale, for the question. I know that she has deep concerns on behalf of her constituents to make sure they have a government, such as the Cook Labor government, that is very keen to support them with cost-of-living pressures in the energy sector. I remind everybody that so far the Labor government has provided the \$600 rebate in 2021 and a \$400 rebate in 2022. In conjunction with the federal government, we have provided a \$500 boost for energy assistance customers and \$400 to all other residential customers, which will be paid in two instalments. I remind members that those rebates were opposed by the Liberal Party.

We have gone and done other things as well. Of course, unlike the Liberal Party, we have not increased electricity prices by 97 per cent, as was done by the former government. Remember that when we came to government, the former government had a pathway for a seven per cent per annum increase in electricity prices. It intended to increase the price of electricity by 30 per cent if it was re-elected in 2017. Fortunately for the people of Western Australia, that increase in cost did not occur because they got a Labor government. They are not the only things we are doing. Both Synergy and Horizon Power have a case management program whereby they work with hardship customers to assist them through their challenges, because it is not just that they cannot pay their power bill; there are usually other issues involved. With the Minister for Community Services, we have reformed the operation of the hardship utility grant scheme and put the financial counselling service back into HUGS, which was taken away by the last government. The last government's changes to HUGS meant that it was helping Synergy and Horizon Power but not the residents. Synergy has created the Keeping Connected program to work with customers. It is a voluntary program that Synergy itself has developed. I met some of the people involved in that program. They are really proud of the work they are doing. Of course, the hardship connection strategy sees disconnections as the last resort, not the first resort, as was being done under the former government.

The other thing we have done is to introduce the household energy efficiency scheme. On Friday, I was very pleased to meet the HEES coaches. This program is being managed by Anglicare in conjunction with financial counsellors and other non-government organisations. Horizon has its version of the program using Aboriginal community-controlled organisations as the opportunity to engage. It was really interesting to talk to the energy coaches. One of them explained to me how they dealt with a particular person. They went through every single piece of electrical equipment in the house and worked out that the reason the power bill was so high was that the person was using a fridge that had been donated to them by a friend. No-one really understands why, but that fridge was creating the bill problem in the house. The HEES program has replaced the fridge and now that person's energy bill is significantly lower. That is a massive assistance. Another example given to me by one of the coaches was of a woman—I could not believe this—who had a \$1 300 bill for one two-month period. Her employer—this is unusual—got her to take home bees in hives to keep in the garage of the house. The employer had her heating the garage to manage the bees through winter and that was leading to a \$1 300 bill for two months of energy!

These people are saving hundreds and hundreds of dollars not just for one year—obviously, they are also benefiting from the grants that we have given—but for the rest of their life. That is why I was shocked to see the shadow Minister for Energy, the member for Cottesloe, criticising the program. Here we have a program that Anglicare, UnitingCare West and other NGOs and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in the Pilbara are working through with the Financial Counsellors' Association of Western Australia to assist 10 000 individual Western Australian families to permanently reduce their electricity bills—forever—and the member for Cottesloe criticises it. No wonder they are so out of touch.

Dr D.J. Honey: When?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: This is the member's tweet from 12 November 2021 when we made the announcement of the program. Here he was, if he has forgotten. We have not forgotten. He might have, but we have not. I am happy to table it. He called the scheme "expensive bureaucratic PR". Tell that to the individuals who are being helped by this program. I champion this program. It is modelled on programs around the world. There is enormous

research that demonstrates why it should be championed. When we launched the program back in 2021 with the then Minister for Community Services, the member for Fremantle, I made the point that if we give a person a fish, we feed them for a day, but if we teach them to fish, they will feed themselves for life. That is what this is about. Of course, the one-off contributions to people's bills gives everyone a benefit. I do not know whether the member for Cottesloe opposes that. It is appalling that he opposes this program, because this one is making massive differences to lots of individuals and I am very proud to be the minister. I table the document.

[See paper [2224](#).]