

Division 33: Communities — Service 1, Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering, \$145 240 000 —

Ms M.M. Quirk, Chair.

Mr M.P. Murray, Minister for Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering.

Ms M.J. Andrews, Director General.

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

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

Mr L. Carren, Executive Director, Finance and Business Services.

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

Mrs E. Ramage, Chief of Staff, Minister for Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering.

[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 he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the 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 in budget paper No 2, volume 2, the heading "Community Services", and the appropriations, expenses and cash assets table. I note the drop in funding of \$15 million from the 2018–19 budget estimate to the actual amount. Can the minister advise what impact that has had on the delivery of seniors services? It is under "Total Appropriations".

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Thank you for that question. Before we get in the saddle to get things going, I will hand directly over to finance. I think it is quite a technical question, and I would hate to get it wrong by 10¢. I defer the question to Liam Carren.

Mr L. Carren: I thank the member for the question and the minister for the referral. Can I clarify which figure the member is referring to?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The total appropriations for the Department of Communities. I understand that the Department of Communities is responsible for many service deliveries, but there is a \$15 million drop under "Total Appropriations" from what was budgeted in 2018–19 to what was actually done in 2018–19. Can the minister explain what effect that \$15 million cut or drop has had on seniors services delivery? This is the figure of \$1.723 million to \$1.708 million, at page 443 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, the line item "Total Appropriations".

Mr L. Carren: I thank the member. The question is what the drop in appropriation is related to, and what impact it has had on seniors?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Yes, so \$15 million was budgeted that was not spent, basically.

Mr L. Carren: We are in May at the moment, and this is an estimate to the end of the financial year. That is the best estimate at the point the budget is produced, so we are estimating that not as many appropriations will be required as originally thought. The information I have in front of me—we have a file that is this thick, and our materiality threshold around collecting comments for this sort of variation is 10 per cent, so, for an agency of our size, I just do not have that with me; I am sorry. What I will say in answer to the second question is that there has been no reduction to the seniors portfolio in the current year budget. Certainly I can say that with great confidence.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: There is a \$15 million drop from what was estimated. It then goes up to \$1.805 million for 2019–20, and then it drops down in 2020–21 and 2021–22 and so forth. Can I get clarification: will this reduction be a sign of the cap that has been put on the seniors' rebate?

The CHAIR: Two things, member. Firstly, you direct your questions to the minister. Secondly, those total appropriations deal with matters in portfolios other than the minister's. For your benefit, I would make the question a little more specific.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Thank you, Madam Chair, for your direction. I will clarify that. As I said at the beginning, I understand the Department of Communities covers many portfolios. There is a massive drop in funding across this portfolio. I am asking about the seniors portfolio part of this funding, because there is no breakdown, unfortunately. The Seniors Card rebate has been capped. Can the minister please advise if that cap is continuing, and if the difference between the cap and the percentage that the Seniors Card used to provide seniors has had an impact?

The CHAIR: I do not think that is a supplementary question. I think it is moving further on, member.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I am talking about the overall budget. I am trying to work out where that has come from, and I am trying to assist, because no-one seems to understand that this covers seniors.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Can you clarify the question, member for Darling Range? Otherwise the minister will be spending all his time trying to work out what you are dealing with.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Again, the complexity of the budget—and the cross-subsidies, I suppose we will call them, or cross-firing between each department—does make it a little difficult, but I will defer to the financial team. I refer to the assistant director general, commissioning and sector engagement, Brad Jolly.

[7.10 pm]

Mr B.P. JOLLY: I thank the minister, and thanks again to the member for the question. I take it that the member is referring to the caps that relate to local government rebates.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I am referring to water and electricity rebates.

Mr B.P. JOLLY: Those rebates do not appear in the Department of Communities' budget. I think I am correct in saying that they are in the Department of Finance's budget. The item that relates to the Seniors Card program that forms part of the Department of Communities' budget is the seniors cost-of-living payments, but not the rebates that the member is referring to.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Can I go on to cost-of-living rebates, as the adviser referred to them?

The CHAIR: The member for Roe had his hand up. You can ask a further question, member.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 443 and the prioritised spend for preventing elder abuse, which is about four lines from the bottom of the page. I understand that is part of the package to tackle elder abuse. Does the commonwealth offer any funding in the form of grants, given that WA has signed up to the "National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians (Elder Abuse) 2019–2023"?

The CHAIR: That was a good concise question, member.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: The commonwealth government has indicated that it supports the WA government, but certainly not financially—only in the sense that it will help direct people to our telephone lines or services that are available. Certainly, as I understand it, no funding has come from that area, which is very, very disappointing, to say the least. We are increasing state funding to help Advocare, which expects a big spike in the number of phone calls it will get due to the publicity just before the federal election. Along with that, we are again increasing the funding for the Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre, which is doing a great job in that area. We are working very hard to make sure that the issue of elder abuse is front and centre.

Attorneys General Australia-wide have also met, and I think that is a very good move. We have picked up on nearly all the recommendations. I think there might have been one that was not; I cannot remember what it was. We are supporting the national plan to respond to elder abuse. The problems that are emerging have been mentioned many times. We want to give people confidence to ask for help in this area. It is very, very difficult for people to speak up when family members are against family members, but this is done in confidence. The people who are doing the job are working very well.

Along with that, we will fund a program to help police officers and ambulance drivers, and other people in those service areas, understand what elder abuse is about. I have said in the Assembly chamber many times that it is about not only physical abuse but also mental or sexual abuse. A lot of it is financial abuse. We have a program in place so that it can be recognised. Many times the police get a call about a disturbance and when they go to the house and knock on the door, they are told that no, it is okay because things have cooled down, but the pressure is still on. We need the police to recognise that and put that into the system, so that we know there may be a problem there and we can try to help those people.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: What would the record show as the major trend in reporting? Is it financial abuse or is there some other major trend?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Firstly, when elder abuse gets publicity, there is always a spike in the number of phone calls and referrals to legal advice. That is the first thing that happens. We are still working through exactly which is the top one, but it is mainly two. One is mental abuse, and the other one that is very high on the list is financial abuse. That includes very small issues such as someone being given a credit card to do the shopping for mum and spending \$200 or \$300 on themselves and \$50 on mum. That is financial abuse and elder abuse because the person concerned is not going to say, “I am going to ring the police and put my son in jail or pull them into gear.” We do not want to see that. We want to educate the person to understand that they are abusing both the credit card of the person concerned and the person. That is at a low level, but there is a lot of low-level abuse. Another one that comes to mind is the issue of “She’ll be right; we’ll move you down the back. We’ll build the granny flat. You sell your house.” We know what happens after that. The younger people want to shift houses and mum and dad are left without any financial capacity because they helped build the house and they do not have a title to their granny flat as such, so then they are back onto the welfare system. It is very, very—I am trying to think of the word. In today’s world, it is about greed in some ways. It is really about greed and not having respect for elders in many cases. It is an increasing issue. Reporting is increasing because we are publicising it. When we publicise it, we have a lot more people coming through the door to look for help.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: On precisely that point, minister, this area has a lot of stigma and taboo, so the increase in reporting is surely a good thing, as this issue comes into daylight and people feel comfortable about expressing their concerns about it.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: That is one of the biggest issues. A mother or a grandmother, whoever, does not want to report to the police or put their child in a position in which they might be booked for something, or taken through the court system. It is very difficult, but we have to make sure that they have the confidence to come to the likes of Advocare and get confidential information and speak about the problem. Sometimes it might take only a letter to the sibling that says they are very much pushing the boundaries, and then it stops. It is very, very difficult for a parent especially to go out and say that they have been abused by one of their family members.

The CHAIR: The member for South Perth has a further question. Member for Mount Lawley, can you wait for the call, because I had two members before you.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: I beg your pardon, Madam Chair.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: From the department’s data, is elder abuse more prevalent in the regions or the metropolitan area?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: It has not been broken down to that degree, but we know it is on the increase. Sometimes because of confidentiality, we do not know where people are ringing from. It is quite different from the normal run of the mill.

[7.20 pm]

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I refer to page 443, and the line item “Preventing Elder Abuse”. The national plan has been widely accepted. What is this money over the forward estimates—\$1.4 million next financial year and \$300 000 in each of the out years—going to do, and where will it be allocated to prevent elder abuse?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Firstly, the Department of Communities has been identified as the lead agency with overall responsibility for coordination of the response to elder abuse. The budget has allocated \$60 000 for educational programs for professionals, as I spoke about. Does the member want me to go through that again?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I just want a breakdown of the money; I do not need the detail of the programs.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: The detail is that we will be talking to police and welfare agencies. As a side issue, we will be talking to Centrelink people, who sometimes cop the brunt of some of the issues that happen in elder abuse because people have their pensions emptied out.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Centrelink is funded by the federal government.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: It is federal, but if its staff are educated and able to identify these problems, we can cut it off very early. Again, we need the federal help, which has not been forthcoming. We will be out there, and we have a federal government that might listen in its second term, because it did not listen in its first. As well as a priority area of the national plan—area 3—\$230 000 has been committed in the 2019–20 budget for an age-friendly and dementia-friendly grants program. This aligns with priority area 2 of the national plan. Along with that, \$130 000 is committed in the 2019–20 budget for delivery of a peer and community education program that provides information, assistance and support to older people, which increases the participation of older people in the community. We are working with that, so that people are not stuck at home, and vulnerable to abuse. Further, \$50 000 has been allocated to support public forums, or roadshows, for greater awareness of elder abuse, social isolation and age-friendly communities in regional areas. The member for South Perth might be interested that we are working in regional areas to address the question he was talking about—or some of it. It is not only a city line.

Further, \$240 000 is committed in the 2019–20 budget for establishment of a seniors' peak body to advocate for and represent the interests of vulnerable older Western Australians. This aligns also with priority area 2 of the national plan. As co-chair of the working group responsible for the development of the national plan, the state government fulfilled its commitment to take a key role in negotiations with state and federal governments to develop a national strategy and funding model to enable services to be delivered. In saying that, our Attorney General has played a lead role in those areas. It is not as though we have sat back and hoped that things would happen; we are actually leading in this area, and we have held meetings for people coming from all over the state.

The current situation, just to round it off, is that Western Australia is working with the commonwealth and other states and territories to investigate the development of a national online register for enduring powers of attorney—something that has popped up again recently. Abuse can be committed under the power of attorney process that we have now. As a personal opinion, I think the power of attorney is quite open, and we should be looking at tightening it up so that people's responsibilities are clearer and more defined than they are now. Given that work is underway on the national register, and the duplication in effort and cost that would be involved in establishing a Western Australia register of enduring powers of attorney, a separate state register of enduring powers of attorney has been put on hold just at this moment until we see what happens on the national issue. Again, we do not want doubling up of processes and having one for the state and one for the federal government.

The member asked the question; it is no good her rolling her eyes now. I will say that we are working very hard along this line to make sure that the member does not roll her eyes again. We are working to make sure that, when it is all sorted out, it is clear and concise, and we will be able to deliver.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: If I could get a brief answer, so that other people can ask questions, it would be greatly appreciated, minister. I am well aware the minister is across his portfolio. Is there any money in the budget for Advocare?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Advocare is a great institution. The number of volunteers who work in that area is really sensational. A lot of them work in their own time, and they go out and meet people, and get down on the ground. Does the member want a brief answer?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: How much funding to Advocare?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: There is \$150 000 in the budget for Advocare this year, an increase of \$35 000 in the 2019–20 funding. Even then, the funding started to run short, and we were able to squirrel away a little money last year to run to the end of the financial year. We cannot say just Advocare, because the other one is \$277 000 to the Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre for older people's rights. I am sure the member in the chair at the moment (Ms M.M. Quirk) would cheer that on, because that group is very highly regarded in the northern suburbs. That is a summary of the money that is there. We could always do with more money but unfortunately the federal government, in its misery, did not help us in this area.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Was the Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre referred to by the minister subject to a tender process?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: They are what we call people who are doing the job, and doing a very good job. We did not put it out to tender as such, because it was ongoing funding, and it is very hard to change an organisation that is doing a very good job, and having the punters out there being confused about where to go next, with a new name. Do not forget: we are talking about elderly people, so we have to look at making sure that they know exactly where to go, what phone numbers are on the wall, and which phone number is scribbled on their hand before they get to the wall. No, it was not put out to tender as such, but the centre did request the increases that we gratefully gave it.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: This might be more appropriately addressed to the Attorney General, but is it not the case that the Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre is the only community legal centre providing elder abuse advice, and that it is part of the national community legal centre organisation—the peak body?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: It still did not go out to tender.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: I am just asking the question. That is my understanding based on my knowledge of the legal centre.

The CHAIR: It is a leading question, but that is all right.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: It is a leading question, but it is still a question, Madam Chair.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: It did not go out to tender.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: That is because it was the only one providing the service.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: We must be very careful about what we say about the Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre. I will take that one on notice. I think it will be far better that we do that. We do not want to put the northern suburbs group under any pressure.

Mr S.A. MILLMAN: I am happy to put that question on notice.

[7.30 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to the significant issues impacting the agency on page 446 and specifically paragraph 12, which is about regional executive director positions. What is the timing for rolling out the regional executive director positions?

The CHAIR: Again, this is the agency as a whole. The member needs to restrict his questions to the Minister for Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I am sure that will be part of those portfolios.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I will defer that question to the director general, who has some notes that will assist with the member's question.

Ms M.J. Andrews: I thank the member for the question. We have six senior positions across regional Western Australia. Currently, four of those positions have been filled. That is part of the new structure and we are filling those senior positions across the regions.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Are these positions committed to each of the nine regional development commission areas in the state, and will they be located within the regional development commissions potentially?

Ms M.J. Andrews: They are not part of the regional development commissions, which are part of a different agency portfolio structure. Is that what the member was asking?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: There are nine regions around the state with a development commission attached to each region. I guess I am asking whether there will be one in each region.

Ms M.J. Andrews: My understanding is that, at this stage, different departments have different regional break-ups. Work is going on across the public sector to get greater alignment across those regional boundaries. I am not in a position to confirm whether our regions are the same as those of the regional development commissions. The history of our districts reaches back into the arrangements for the former Department for Child Protection. In bringing together the various agencies, we are operating with those boundaries. As I said, work is going on and we are looking to get greater alignment across different agencies.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: It is my view that those boundaries are not exactly set in stone and there will be some tweaking and moving around to make sure the hat fits, to say the least, in those areas. To say that they will be under a development commission is not the case, but using those boundaries could be to some advantage to the cross-agency areas we are trying to get to.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I refer to the table at the top of page 444 and to the line item "Seniors Cost of Living Rebate". I note there is a drop from \$1.5 million to \$694 000, \$642 000 and \$626 000 across the forward estimates. Can the minister explain those cuts for me?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: The cost-of-living rebate is indexed by the CPI rate released by Treasury during the budget, which is quite common. The reduction in the budget for rebates in the forward estimates for 2020–21 is due to a decrease in population growth, a lower CPI forecast, and a change in the age eligibility, which now goes up every two years. That is just a natural decline. It is not a cut as such. It is about demand and the moneys put forward to meet that demand under the age criteria.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The minister said it was due to population growth. We all understand that people are living to a riper old age, which many of us are very happy about. Obviously, population growth does not really affect seniors. It just means that people are living longer. Can the minister confirm that it is not population growth, but the change of policy on the cost-of-living rebate under the government that has caused this decline? Could the minister also provide the rebate claims for 2016–17, 2017–18 and 2018–19?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Questions like this come about because homework has not been done. The changes were made under the Liberal–National government. I would call that an own goal. Those changes happened—age eligibility has increased by two years so far—and there is a dip in this area. Members should be clear that it was changed under the Liberal–National government.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: This government has had three budgets. This has dropped from \$1.5 million to \$694 000, and will then drop to \$642 000 and \$626 000 over the government's forward estimates, which we had nothing to do with. Regardless, the government has had three budgets now and this is a massive decline. Seniors are living longer, the cost of living has gone through the roof, and people are struggling and are not able to pay their bills. These seem to be pretty harsh cuts.

The CHAIR: Member, is there a question there, or is that a statement?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The minister has not answered the whole question, so I was giving him time to think. Could the minister provide, as supplementary information, the number of rebate claims from 2016–17, 2017–18 and 2018–19, and can he break it down by utility and local government rates?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I have no problem whatsoever with providing that because, again, it is a follow-on from the Liberal–National government policy.

The CHAIR: Can the minister repeat what he will provide for the member?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I will provide information on the —

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: It is the number of rebate claims from 2016–17, 2017–18 and 2018–19; and can it be broken down by what the rebates are for?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I have no problem, Madam Chair, with providing that information.

[*Supplementary Information No B28.*]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 449 and the table associated with service area 1. Can the minister outline the number of Seniors Cards that are currently issued and being actively used in Western Australia?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: More than 380 000 WA Seniors Cards have been provided by this department for seniors to enjoy state government concessions and exclusive discounts. There are 380 000 of them, so they are very popular. Some people who have them are from South Perth, some are from Collie, and a few are from Kalgoorlie. I even think there are a few in Esperance, even though the member for Roe does not get down there very often. The Seniors Card has been popular. Over recent times, more and more businesses have joined up to provide discounts for seniors in the booklet that they receive. I am surprised at how many seniors use this booklet to receive discounts. It obviously works, otherwise businesses would not advertise in the first place. Along with the benefits that the Seniors Card provides, seniors are entitled to other discounts. I am looking forward to using it myself.

[7.40 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Can the minister provide the split of Seniors Cards between metropolitan seniors and regional seniors?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I do not think we have that breakdown, but if the member wants to put the question on notice, we can chase that up.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: With the exception of the Country Age Pension Fuel Card, are regional Seniors Card holders entitled to any additional concessions or benefits?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: They certainly are. Discounts are available for regional transport under Transwa. The member might want to travel to Perth from Esperance some time. If he is the right age, he can get a discount.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Is that for the *Australind*?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: We do not have a train yet. That is next week. Holders of that card get deductions on their water rates. Discounts are also available for local government rates in regional areas, the same as anywhere else. Seniors can also receive a rebate for the emergency services levy, which is one of those payments that we have to make. That discount is really good. It also extends to driver's licences and vehicle licence fees.

The CHAIR: Minister, I think the member asked about additional rebates or concessions for regional members as opposed to the general discounts.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I could go through the list, if the member would like, to ensure that the member remembers what they are. There are a further seven discounts that cardholders can claim. That is across the board, not necessarily regional. Country people can apply for an air-conditioning rebate. Again, it is probably the most generous card in Australia. I am sure that if members ring their new colleagues in Queensland and find out what they are getting, they will be very pleased with the rebates that we are giving out.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I note from the table on page 460 that no funding has been provided for the grandcarers assistance program—it was only \$125 000.

The CHAIR: Minister, does that come under Minister McGurk?

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: So grandcarers are not under Seniors? Is that right?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Yes.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: The minister got off the hook on that one.

The CHAIR: That is inappropriate.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: No, it is about research—poor research.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I also refer to page 460 and the line item “Hardship and Utility Grants Scheme” under the controlled grants and subsidies table. There is a drop of \$6 million next year.

The CHAIR: Member, I do not think that relates to the minister's portfolio either. Next question.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I also refer to page 460 and the line item "Seniors Cost of Living Rebates". Does the minister have any information on how many seniors have had their power cut off?

The CHAIR: That should be directed to the Minister for Energy, I would think.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: Would it not come under the cost-of-living rebate for assistance for their power bill?

The CHAIR: That question should be directed to the Minister for Energy. Try again.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I would not have that information.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: They are just playing silly buggers.

Mrs A.K. HAYDEN: I know. They are just playing the game.

The CHAIR: Member, it is not about playing the game. This is about getting the agency right. I gave directions at the beginning to say that you needed to make sure that the right questions are asked of the right minister. No-one is playing silly buggers. This is just how it works.

The appropriation was recommended.