

WATER PRICES

Grievance

MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont) [9.53 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Water, and it concerns the cost-of-living pressures experienced by many of my constituents in the electorate of Belmont. Everybody in this place recognises that the past few years have been incredibly difficult for Western Australians. When COVID first hit, we saw firsthand the pressures placed on supply chains right around the world, as just one of the major impacts of the pandemic, and, unfortunately, Western Australia was not immune. The economic, financial and social hardship that COVID caused for our communities was substantial.

I am incredibly proud of the decisions the McGowan government has made to help Western Australians and local businesses through this incredibly difficult time. The \$400 household electricity rebate has had a massive impact on households, especially those in my community. I received a great deal of feedback that it provided critical and timely relief, especially for the most vulnerable in my community. Unfortunately, the previous Liberal government had an appalling record in easing cost-of-living pressures. It is worth highlighting that the average annual water bill, for example, increased by more than four times the rate under this government. I am proud that the McGowan government has not continued the previous government's unnecessary cost increases for essential household services.

The 2020–21 financial year saw the first reduction in the average household water bill in more than a decade. I commend the Minister for Water for this significant contribution and for his influence in achieving such an outstanding result. These efforts are even more significant given the current volatility of the global environment. The war in Ukraine has exacerbated the economic and financial pressures that Western Australians were already experiencing due to the pandemic. It has impacted fuel prices and in many parts of the world it has caused huge increases in the cost of food. No jurisdiction in Australia has been immune to the inflationary pressures stemming from this terrible war, but, just as with the onset of COVID, the McGowan government's responsible and considered approach in times of crisis has put Western Australia in a much better position than other jurisdictions. On the east coast, for example, household fees and charges have increased drastically this year. Electricity bills are up 11.3 per cent in Brisbane, 8.5 per cent in Sydney and 7.2 per cent in Adelaide. Thankfully, our government has delivered two electricity credits to all Western Australian households, totalling \$1 000, and household fees and charges have decreased by 3.8 per cent this year.

I am proud to be part of a government that is making the necessary decisions to support the most vulnerable members in my community, whether through the household electricity rebate or by supporting our seniors through the safety and security rebate. Clearly, we have a long way to go as we navigate through global events and a strong inflationary environment. I ask the minister to outline the efforts of our government in continuing to make it easier for Western Australians to meet cost-of-living pressures.

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean — Minister for Water) [9.56 am]: I am very happy to respond to this grievance and outline to the house what the McGowan government has done to assist Western Australians with their water bills. We know that, in the current environment, households across the world are experiencing real cost-of-living pressures. When I became the Minister for Water, I was determined to do everything possible to assist Western Australian households to meet the significant cost of their water bills.

The member touched on the experience of Western Australian families under the previous government. I want to recap the situation we found when we came to government. During the period of the previous Liberal–National government, water bills went up significantly every year, higher than the rate of inflation. It was an increase of 6.7 per cent in 2009–10 and then, rolling forward, 10.8 per cent, 8.5 per cent, 6.8 per cent, six per cent, 5.2 per cent, 4.5 per cent and then 4.5 per cent, making for a total increase of 66.8 per cent under the previous Liberal–National government.

What was the impact of those massive increases on Western Australian households' ability to pay their water bills? I will refer to one statistic. In opposition, we observed a significant yearly increase in the number of households having their water reduced to a trickle due to not being able to pay their water bills. In the last full year of the previous Liberal–National government, 2 467 Western Australian households—nearly two and a half thousand—had their water reduced to a trickle, effectively cut off, because they could not pay the bill. That is about 50 households a week or 10 households a working day. As the shadow minister, I raised that many times, particularly with the current Leader of the Opposition, who was then the Minister for Water, yet the previous government did nothing. Those disconnections were a direct result of the previous government significantly hiking water charges under its watch.

Water price increases have been much more moderate since we came to government. We inherited a six per cent increase in the budget in our first year. Following that, the increases under this government were 5.5 per cent in 2018–19 and then, rolling forward, 2.5 per cent, minus 1.3 per cent, 1.75 per cent and 2.5 per cent. So far, the total increase in water bills has been only 18 per cent. We have been very conscious of any increase in the price of water. If we compare the record of this government with the record of the previous government, the difference is stark.

I am pleased to say that as a result, the number of disconnections for people who are unable to pay their water bills has gone down from nearly 2 500 to approximately 800 in the year before the pandemic. Of course, during the pandemic, we did not do any restrictions at all, but in the full year before the pandemic, it was down to 800. In the last full year, there have been only 334, so there has been a significant reduction. We have done that because we have been proactive with people who are struggling to pay their bills.

We have introduced a number of programs. The one that I think is the most innovative is Medical Assist. We discovered that people who do home dialysis get a massive water bill. Home dialysis is cheaper for the taxpayer because those people are not in hospital, so we now give people who are doing home dialysis 30 000 litres of water for free each year. That is a saving of about \$380 annually. That takes the stress out of paying their water bill for people on home dialysis. In October 2020, we extended that program to include households who have a family member who suffers from incontinence, as people in that situation might need to constantly use their washing machine. We have also introduced the Start Over program for people who have long-term debt. If those people go back to paying their bills on a regular basis for a period of two years, we will wipe their long-term debt. All this has significantly reduced the number of Western Australian households that are in financial difficulty because of their water bill. It is not just me who thinks we have done a good job; the Financial Counselling Network of WA, which deals with customers in hardship on a regular basis, wrote to me and said —

We are writing on behalf of the Financial Counselling Network ... to acknowledge the measures the Water Corporation has taken to support customer experiencing financial hardship and payment difficulties.

... We are pleased to note the positive feedback received ... in relation to the Water Corporation's customer focused hardship policy and schemes to assist vulnerable customers.

The letter is quite long, but it concludes by commending the Water Corporation for its approach to hardship. Just last week, I was talking to the CEO of a women's refuge and she said that it has been really impressive. She described water as a bland portfolio—I disagree with that. She said, "In a bland portfolio like water, you have managed to drive significant social change and assist Western Australians in hardship because of the different approach that the McGowan government takes to assisting households in hardship." I am very proud of that.