

Division 35: Communities — Services 1 to 6, Volunteering, \$1 072 681 000 —

Mrs L.A. Munday, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Minister for Environment representing the Minister for Volunteering.

Mr M. Rowe, Director General.

Mr M. Crevola, Chief Financial Officer.

Ms L. Kalasopatan, Assistant Director, Management Accounting.

Ms C. Irwin, Assistant Director General, Strategy and Partnerships.

Mr M. Goff, Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with these details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall only be examined in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by close of business Friday, 3 June 2022. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system.

I would just like to point out that in one hour, we need to cover three divisions, division 35, division 3 and division 14. And, member for Roe, do you want to start us off on division 35?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 539 and the line item “Volunteering WA Digital Platform”, about 90 per cent of the way down the page, just above “Homelessness”. Has the platform been established?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thank you, member for Roe. This is one of our main commitments in the areas of volunteering and it is about providing a digital platform to help better engage with volunteers across the community, an online platform. There was a previous amount of \$175 000 committed in earlier budgets and this current budget is inclusive of that amount. The current budget has a provision of \$30 000 to fund the business case and to cost and explore the database. It is not up and running yet, but obviously these web platforms have to be done right. They have to be responsive to the needs of the community and they have to be accessible and easy to use, so that work is currently underway.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: It is not up and running yet, despite the fact that the government had that funding back in the 2021–22 budget as well. How long does the minister think it will be before it will be up and running and volunteers can access it?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thanks, member. It is not as though there is nothing in place at the moment. There is an online process for volunteers to make contact and to be able to offer their services. What this is particularly about is that we know that during times of emergencies and major events there is often a spontaneous mood in the electorate to offer their services to volunteer, so a part of this program or new application is to work out a new, efficient manner of dealing with those surges of community goodwill to volunteer. It is not that we are lacking an online facility for volunteers to reach out and be put in contact with community groups, but that work is going on now to develop and spend this money through Volunteering WA, and we expect it to come back to government with a proposal to deliver that service later this year. I cannot give the member an exact time line, but progress is certainly occurring.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Okay. Thank you, minister. I will leave it at that.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Having an online platform hopefully will help in getting more people to volunteer throughout the year, not just when we just have a disaster like the cyclone that hit the midwest. Where does the minister see volunteering in WA currently, particularly in regional WA? Does he see it on the decline? Does he have any evidence to say that it is declining right across the board, from St John Ambulance to fireys and any other organisations such as volunteer sea rescue? Does the minister see it declining or does he see it as very patchy?

[3.10 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: As the member knows, I was previously the Minister for Volunteering, and that is now a responsibility for Minister Dawson. There was certainly a hit to volunteering numbers during COVID. A lot of volunteering is done by people who are seniors and retirees, and, obviously, during COVID, they wanted to stay safe at home; indeed, many of us wanted to retreat to our homes and make ourselves safe. That inability to get out

and about in the community had an impact. Thankfully, it was not as bad an impact as other jurisdictions have experienced. We anticipate it was about a 3.3 per cent reduction in WA volunteers from pre-2020, and then compared with the period after COVID in March 2020. It took a bit of a hit, and it probably has made itself felt unevenly across the board. Organisations that rely on more senior members might be hit a little more, but the average was a 3.3 per cent reduction.

It has just been pointed out that what we are seeing now is organisations modifying their programs to support virtual volunteering. There are a lot of people working, and it might be impractical in many senses. I am sure people cannot fight a fire online, but there are many people who visit people in care, people who are lonely. It is not the same as face-to-face, but obviously going online and making contact with people and still having that social contact is very important. Generally, I think we are very blessed in Western Australia with our volunteers. The member will know, being a regional member, that so many of our regions rely upon people volunteering, often in more than one capacity. We all know the story about the person who has a full wardrobe with different uniforms, and they put on the one that is most appropriate, whether it is St John Ambulance or bush fire fighter or an SES volunteer uniform in orange.

We, as a state, rely on volunteers very much, and although there has been a bit of a hit, I think we have travelled fairly well through COVID, and I think it is part of the government's responsibility to encourage and to point out the value of volunteering. I know that it is just not the community that benefits; it is actually also the volunteers themselves. They often get a sense of fulfilment, it is good for mental health and increases their social mobility, and it is good for volunteers. In my current capacity, I meet many volunteers with responsibility for Kings Park, for instance. We have volunteer guides there that have been there, some of them, for many decades. There are volunteers in the environmental area who weed areas that are wetlands, for instance, and who go on planting weekends. It is a quite significant contribution to our economy, and I think, from memory, it is about \$39 billion, if we had to put a value on that contribution. But I think it is probably even greater than that, if we could ever quantify it in monetary terms, because of the social and mental health aspects that it brings.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thank you. I just briefly want to refer to page 540 and the line item, "Volunteering Grants". How many recipients were there; and, of the grant funds available, how much has been expended?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: In 2021 a total of \$29 141 was awarded to 30 eligible organisations to support events and activities and acknowledge the important role volunteers play in our community.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Sorry, minister, can you just speak up a little bit?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Sorry, member; I was looking down.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Yes.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: For 2021, I have a figure here of \$29 141 awarded to 30 eligible organisations to support events and activities to acknowledge the role of volunteers, and there was also Thank a Volunteer Day, where they were eligible to receive grants of up to \$1 000. Thank a Volunteer Day was obviously quite popular.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: All right, I thank the minister. I think I will leave it at that and move on.

The appropriation was recommended.