

Division 35: Communities — Services 10 and 11, Disability Services; Seniors and Ageing, \$127 625 000 —

Mrs L.A. Munday, Chair.

Mr D.T. Punch, Minister for Disability Services; Seniors and Ageing.

Mr M. Rowe, Director General.

Ms M. Hailes-MacDonald, Assistant Director General, Disability Services.

Mr P. Payne, Executive Director, Regulation and Quality.

Mr M. Burgess, Director, Strategic Policy.

Ms L. Kalasopatan, Assistant Director, Management Accounting.

Mr M. Crevola, Chief Financial Officer.

Mr T. Palmer, Chief of Staff, Minister for Disability Services; Seniors and Ageing.

Ms J. Houston, Senior Policy Adviser.

Mr C. Roberts, 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.

We are ready to go. Member for Vasse, thank you.

Ms L. METTAM: Just before we begin, can I just get some clarification: do we have to stop at three o'clock, right on the dot?

The CHAIR: Yes. This concludes at 3.00 pm.

Ms L. METTAM: Right, not that much time. Thank you. Minister and advisers, I refer to page 523, paragraph 15, which is in relation to the establishment of the Office of Disability. It could be in relation to paragraph 15 or paragraph 14, but what I really want to ask a question on is in relation to the concerning news about Activ and the closure of part of the Activ operations. Some 700 jobs are being lost from August. I took some heart from the comments made by the Premier and perhaps the minister, as well as the federal government. My question is: what assurance can the minister provide that those jobs will not be lost from August this year?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The first thing I would like to do is acknowledge all the people who are participants with Activ. I think it must have been an incredible shock for them to hear that news from Activ, and I cannot imagine the anguish that many of those people have felt. I saw some reports about the distress that the announcement caused, and I am certainly aware that families and carers are very, very concerned as well.

The member may be aware that the supported employment arrangements, ADEs, were funded originally through the federal Department of Social Services, and that changed mid-last year. The commonwealth, which has always had responsibility for the funding of these employment services, transferred the funding across to the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and the NDIS arrangements, as is the ethos of the NDIS, were made to maximise opportunities for choice and control by people with disability, to ensure that reasonable and necessary services are provided. The ADEs and Activ have taken the view that that funding arrangement does not suit their modes of operation and is leading them into financial losses. I have not seen from Activ the detail of how it has arrived at that conclusion, other than that it has made public —

Ms L. METTAM: The minister has or has not?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I have not. It has provided public statements about its losses, but I have not seen the detail of those losses.

We, as a government, are very concerned about those issues and the impact on the participants and their families. We raised the issue continuously, for a period of time, with the previous government to try to arrive at a sensible

dialogue about the future of Activ and how, if there needed to be a change to Activ's services—I understand from Activ that it wants to move into an academy style of format—it should be at a pace that people who are participants can understand, be involved with, and have some sense of choice over and control about the services around them, rather than having things done to them. That is the issue I have heard continuously from the disability sector; it is part of the sense of exclusivity that people with disability feel, rather than inclusivity. I have major concerns about the process that has rolled out over the past week, and the lack of a framework from the NDIS to allow for a more sensible discussion and a continuation of people's circumstances until they are able to make a decision either that they want to change, or that they want to move into alternate arrangements in a planned way.

In terms of assurances, I can assure the member that we have raised the issue with the incoming federal government; the Premier has raised the issue with the incoming government. I have been in discussions with the chair of Activ, and I have written to the CEO of Activ asking for a pause on progressing the closure until those further discussions can take place with the incoming government. As you know, we have not yet had a sworn-in federal minister for disability, so that is something that I hope will progress as soon as we have a sworn minister.

It is an appalling set of circumstances, and I feel deeply for those people who have been affected. But I have to reiterate: this is a decision, in terms of the funding arrangements, of the commonwealth. It has always been a commonwealth funding responsibility, and if the commonwealth wishes to change those arrangements, it needs to engage with providers and with people with disability to make sure that sensible outcomes for people with disability are arrived at. I am very hopeful that that will be the case in the future.

Ms L. METTAM: Is the minister saying that it is the model of funding that is the issue here, as opposed to the structure of Activ itself? I know from my own experience, just locally, that there has been such great feedback about the way Activ operates. But can I interpret from that that the model that we need to look at to better support Activ going forward is that model of funding coming from the commonwealth? Is that a fair interpretation of what the minister is saying?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: What I am saying is that Activ has expressed to me two things. One is a general desire to look at its services into the future and the model of service provision; and secondly, that the funding arrangements as they stand now are not sustainable in supporting its current business operations into the future. Those are the two issues that have been expressed to me. I have been into the workshops and spoken with people with disability, so I understand how important that environment, the social context of those workplaces are for those people. I have said to Activ, to the previous minister and to the incoming government that it is very important that if change is to take place—this is change that comes under the purview of Activ and the commonwealth—it needs to be very cognisant of the needs of the people who are participants in those workshops.

[2.50 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 526 and service 10, “Supporting People with Disability to Access Services and Participate in Their Community”. In January, WA's blind cricket team, the Venetians, were unable to secure funding to travel to the National Cricket Inclusion Championships. What funding is set aside within the Department of Communities for disability sports and inclusion in sport?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The provision of recreational sporting support is not in my purview; it is in the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries. The NDIS itself would have provisions in plans for those people who have identified participation for the cost of recreation and sporting activities, but there is not a specific budget allocation for sport and recreational activity within the Department of Communities.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Does the minister not undertake any advocacy on behalf of communities and groups that have disability in relation to sports? Does he not undertake any advocacy?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I would not say that, member. I continually advocate on issues of accessibility and inclusion, and when matters are raised with me, I have certainly raised them with the relevant ministers. But the whole emphasis of the WA disability strategy is about inclusion, and inclusion is about all organisations, whether government or non-government, recognising and accommodating inclusion and people with disability in their mainstream services.

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to paragraph 19 on page 523 in relation to the bilateral agreement for a transition to the NDIS in Western Australia. I know there is a lot of interest across the sector about the work being undertaken at a state level to best inform this agreement and our unique needs as a state with such a significant land mass. Can the minister provide some indication of the level of information gathering and data analysis that is being undertaken so that we can ensure, as a state, that we are putting our best foot forward in terms of the unique needs of Western Australians with a disability as they relate to this agreement?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes. I am looking forward to those negotiations taking place with the new government. The negotiations on the bilateral agreement are in anticipation of the full scheme agreement commencing on 1 July 2023. Work has now started on that and through those negotiations we will need to agree on the total and future projections

of Western Australian NDIS participants, but we will also need to take into account issues around, as the member has mentioned, Western Australia's unique geography, the nature of our communities, the nature of rural and remote communities and culturally appropriate services—a whole range of factors that need to roll into that process of negotiation. The Department for Communities is leading that negotiation, but it is in collaboration with the Department of Treasury and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. At the moment, we are in the process of identifying the initial steps to develop the negotiation approach. The government's arrangements will surround that, and the initial analysis that goes to the heart of the member's question.

The negotiation strategy is going to be informed by a two-stage targeted stakeholder engagement process, and that, in essence, will be to forward the key issues and provide evidence to inform and shape those negotiations for future arrangements. Clearly, there will be a strong evidence base in how we take those negotiations forward. That engagement, pivotally, has to include people with disability; the disability sector; the importance of mainstream government agencies and non-government organisations in terms of their responsibilities; education; justice; and housing. It also needs to be really reflective in the sense of the outcomes that we are seeking under the Western Australian disability strategy. Our priority is to ensure that the NDIS is suitable for all Western Australians, and my priority particularly is to make sure that Western Australians who are participants in the NDIS feel valued, feel included and feel recognised in terms of the reasonable and necessary need that they have for that sense of ownership and choice, which is so fundamental to the NDIS.

Ms L. METTAM: This is a new question and it relates to either of the NDIS line items. It also relates to a grievance that I presented to the Minister for Community Services in relation to the local care coordinator trial and what was effectively the closure of the Department of Communities office in 2018 in Margaret River. Part of the reason for this trial was that it effectively utilised departmental staff. Basically, these local care coordinators played a role in bridging the gap and providing support for people with a disability, and also those who might have been challenged by homelessness, as well as a range of other areas. It was very much seen and recognised as a successful trial from the local community perspective. There was one local care coordinator that was based in Margaret River, another one based in Busselton, and perhaps other areas as well. It is a Communities role. Given the gap that we are now seeing as a result of that role no longer continuing, is the government rethinking that position that was so successful in the community, and is the minister aware of these issues?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Can the member advise which line item she is referring to?

Ms L. METTAM: It relates to the NDIS, and it relates to ensuring that people are able to live independently in their communities, so I would say paragraph 15. It was critical to providing that gap in need in support.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I think it is a very long bow, because that service, as your grievance reflected, falls under the responsibility of the Minister for Community Services. Insofar as I discussed with the member earlier, the negotiation arrangements with the NDIS, implicit in the NDIS is an effective advocacy and planning model, and we fund advocacy services at a state level. The NDIS itself is, in recognition of its responsibility, reinvigorating its role and its obligations in relation to local coordination for NDIS services, so I think the member needs to think of the two as two, even though they might share a title. They are actually two separate things. I am very keen to support the NDIS arrangements on how to improve the support services around people who, firstly, are making plans and, secondly, need to connect into supports and services within the local community.

The CHAIR: Sorry, minister; I have to interrupt. It is three o'clock and we need to end division 35.

The appropriation was recommended.

[3.00 pm]