

Division 4: Public Sector Commission —

Mrs M.R. Marshall, Chair.

Mr R.H. Cook, Minister for Public Sector Management.

Ms S. O'Neill, Public Sector Commissioner.

Mr S. McLeod, Manager, Corporate Services.

Mr D. Ferguson, Executive Director, Integrity and Risk.

Mr L. Warner, Executive Director, Workforce Policy and Diversity.

Ms T. Milici, Executive Director, Data Analytics and Technology.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof 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 those details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only 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 noon on Friday, 31 May 2024. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

Member for Roe.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: On page 73, I refer to the “Western Australian Public Sector Learning Initiative—Build and Run Costs” under new initiatives. We are looking at \$29-odd million being spent on training for 35 000 non-frontline public sector employees. Will this training be nationally accredited?

Mr R.H. COOK: My notes do not cover the nature of the curriculum, so I might hand that over to the Public Sector Commissioner.

Ms S. O'Neill: The initiative will build 120 courses that will be developed locally. They will be bespoke for the Western Australian public sector, built with subject matter experts in Western Australia but also drawing on national and international best expertise. At this point, we are choosing not to accredit courses because that would invoke a whole range of other processes that need to be brought into place and, to be frank, in many instances, they would not be necessary. Having said that, professions such as chief finance officers and legal people will have their accreditation undertaken in the normal way. Those professional occupations that require accreditation will not be part of the initiative in the first instance. It is foundational learning, so for those professions that require a particular qualification, that will continue to be done in the normal way.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: On the training providers, can we be enlightened on whether they will be registered training organisations or a mixture? What is the plan?

Mr R.H. COOK: As the member has observed, this is an important program. It will allow the 35 000 or so public servants—it is not around doctors and nurses, but other public servants—to undertake courses to build their own skills and capabilities, which, of course, will have an uplift in the effectiveness of the work that the government does. Essentially, the Public Sector Commission is providing it as a fee-for-service opportunity for other departments. The nature of the courses and the providers of those courses will depend on the course. It is about a range of skill sets that we want particularly our younger members of the public service to start to gain so they can increase their effectiveness. Of course, it is an opportunity for them to develop in the roles they work in. On the course providers, it will very much depend on the course itself. The idea is that the program will provide about 120 courses across different core areas—finance, contract management, procurement, integrity, policy, digital and data, workforce planning, customer service and more. Some of them will be entry-level courses and people would not need to go to a third party to have that curriculum provided. For other high-level parts of it, I can see a third party would want to be engaged to provide those specific details. I might ask the commissioner to provide further information on that.

[11.20 am]

Ms S. O'Neill: To build on the Premier’s commentary there, quite rightly, we will be in procurement for a learning services partner. As the Premier said, that learning services partner will draw together a procurement—I guess, if you like—supply community of providers from Western Australia and beyond, where we need to. The importance

of this initiative is that in the past we have gone to procurement for learning, or training, and, really, the authority of the learning has rested with the provider, whereas we will outline very clearly the design principles, the philosophy and the curriculum that the Western Australian public service wants. We will not necessarily buy an external business model, although we will draw on that. There will be quite different bespoke case studies and learnings specific to the WA public sector, so it is quite a different approach. When we contract a learning services provider, as I said, it will put together a supply community and that will bring the best of providers in Western Australia into the community. That supply community will be managed by the learning services provider that we procure, but it will be under the auspices of the Western Australian government. Importantly, and it has not happened before, all of the learning that is developed will belong to the crown, to the Western Australian government, as intellectual property. That is a very different approach. It is the first time that there has been this level of investment and capability uplift in the Western Australia public service, so, obviously, we are very anxious and keen to get it started. It is a fantastic outcome for the WA public sector.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Obviously, \$29 million is a lot of money and, as was pointed out, in some ways it is the first time that this has happened. Will some key performance indicators be looked for as a result of such a large investment? Will some measurable things come out of this?

Mr R.H. COOK: Just to clarify, there will be \$19.2 million for the construction of the platform and the courses themselves, and the final \$0.8 million will be for the engagement of Public Sector Commission staff to undertake the management of courses. I once had a boss say, “If you think training is expensive, try seeing how expensive not training is.” About 35 000 staff, predominantly under the Community and Public Sector Union–Civil Service Association of WA agreement, will have the opportunity to undertake these courses. From that, I expect a significant uplift in the capability of the public service. It will mean a more capable and effective public service, which will improve the services to the Western Australian public. I am sure there will be opportunities for outcomes to be tested against criteria to make sure it is an effective program. I might ask the commissioner to provide more details on that aspect of the member’s question.

Ms S. O’Neill: Capability is a difficult item to measure per se because it takes in so many different elements, but we know when it is good. We will expect all managers of individuals, as part of their required performance management, to look at the performance of each of those 35 000 people. We already have performance measures in place for capability, but here we will focus on continuous uplift and improvement across the whole sector. The program will have an evaluation element. I think it will take a year or so for procurement, and then the program will be designed to be developed over a year—so the building of those building blocks and the curriculum. We will not wait the year to release curriculum courses but do drops of courses as they are built, obviously in agreement with the government. There will be some implementation time because it is quite a change in that it will be centralised and will set a standard of learning and quality. It will be a very different process but when we get down the track there will be some evaluation. I expect individuals to be assessed in accordance with the normal processes of their capability and their performance management, which is a requirement, and then there will be the program itself. As part of the procurement, we will have built-in measures. It will be the first time we will be able to report to government on the amount of training undertaken, so we will have built-in measures for the program. We will expect every line manager to assess capability and performance in the normal way.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: On page 74 of budget paper No 2, paragraph 1.1 states —

The initiative will be delivered through a one-off allocation of new funding for build costs ...

But then it says —

... with running costs over 2025–26 to 2027–28 being offset by matching expense reductions across the participating agencies’ approved budgets.

Can the Premier outline what those offsets will be? As I said, we are talking about a \$29 million program over the three out years.

Mr R.H. COOK: Under “Spending Changes: New Initiatives” on page 73 of budget paper No 2, the first line item is “Western Australian Public Sector Learning Initiative”, which is the contribution from the Public Sector Commission for Public Sector Commission staff to undertake the courses. The second line item refers to not only capital investment into the build of the courses, which I said was just under \$20 million, but also an inflow of dollars from agencies for run costs. The member will see across other divisions in the budget for each department a negative amount, or an expense entry, which is essentially the department paying the Public Sector Commission for its staff to access the initiative. Hopefully, I have not massacred that too much. It is essentially the contribution towards running the courses.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Is the Public Sector Commission’s thinking that this might help with retention of staff and staff moving between agencies so they have a common base? At the moment there is lots of training being

done but this program will try get it on the one platform; therefore, there will be a benefit and people will be able to move their capability between agencies.

Mr R.H. COOK: Absolutely, member. This will provide the opportunity for an internal recruitment officer to see what capabilities a staff member has because they have undertaken certain courses. In addition, it will provide the opportunity for staff to see the pathways that they have to follow as part of their career progression. From that point of view, I think it will be a really effective retention tool, because people will know that if they hang around, they will get the opportunities that these courses will provide. They will become prouder members of the public service from that perspective. Of course, the expenditure this year reflects that this is something that is built once and then used many times. Instead of every department going out and undertaking its own procurement process in relation to the training needs of its staff, this will provide departments with the opportunity to essentially access great courses right across the public sector. From that perspective, I think this will be a really important landmark in driving quality in our public service, which, ultimately, will lead to quality in terms of the provision of services to the public.

[11.30 am]

Dr D.J. HONEY: I will say at the outset that I am extraordinarily sceptical about this. I worked in the public service for eight and a half years and I worked in the private sector for 24 years. I am somewhat surprised that the public service is so unique that it needs its own in-house training group. I assume that all departments have a responsibility for training their employees. Is that correct or not?

Mr R.H. COOK: Obviously, every department has a responsibility to train and develop its staff. This will provide us with a single platform across the public sector to really standardise the expectations we have for the competencies of staff, particularly at different levels of the public service.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Could the Premier indicate what is so unique about the public sector that it needs its own in-house training? As I said, I worked as a public servant for eight and a half years within the Chemistry Centre in the then Department of Mines. It was only one part of the public service, but the skills I required for that job were not unique to the public sector. I was carrying out specific tasks. There is nothing unique about financial training in the public sector. In fact, I am struggling to see anything that is unique in the public sector that would require a bespoke training facility. On the contrary, what we have seen in the public sector over the last handful of years is massive growth in the number of employees, and it looks like this will lead to even further growth in the number of public sector employees. To get to my substantive question, what is unique about the public sector that makes it different from everywhere else, where training is provided in the normal way?

Mr R.H. COOK: As the member would know, every organisation has its own requirements and own base level of skills that need to be achieved. I seek to differ from the member on, for instance, the financial management regime and skill sets required in the not-for-profit sector or government sector and the private sector. I have a degree in public administration. I also have a Master of Business Administration. I can tell the member that the accounting standards, principles and approaches around financial management are significantly different between government financial accounting and private sector financial accounting. But that is not to say, for instance, that a department will have a chief finance officer who will not need to seek training from their particular college of study. I suspect that in-house counsel will continue to need to do professional development through the usual channels as part of their ongoing accreditation for their qualifications. Let us take, for example, an entry-level public servant who has come into the public service and wants to acquire the skills they need to be a good public servant. It might be around questions of internal office communications. It might be around how to write a briefing note. It might be around how to prepare communications for a government department or how to meet the unique needs of that particular government itself.

I want the member to understand that this is not about going off and reinventing the wheel of what is already out there. In large part, this will be about utilising a universal platform across government to access courses and training opportunities that might be taken from a panel of private sector providers or might utilise some internal training capability. This is not about trying to reinvent the wheel, as in to be our own registered training organisation; this is about continuing to standardise the skill sets and requirements of public servants to ensure that we are driving a level of capability through the public service at all times. The member will be more familiar than anyone about the way that the resources industry, in particular, can suck public servants out of the public sector. That, of itself, leads to challenges in maintaining particular standards and skills inside the public sector. If we are much more overt and clear across the public sector about our expectations around personal skill sets, I think we can drive a much better service to the public.

Just taking the point made by the member for Cannington earlier, if employers provide a career pathway in very explicit terms to their employees, they then have an opportunity to lock those people in for the longer term because they understand what those career paths look like.

Dr D.J. HONEY: How many FTEs will be associated with this once it is a mature function within the public sector? Approximately how many full-time equivalent positions will be associated with this new initiative?

Mr R.H. COOK: As I said, member, this will impact around 35 000 staff.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I mean the number of FTEs who will be engaged in this initiative. In other words, how many FTEs will be required for this initiative?

Mr R.H. COOK: Nine.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Nine. Okay; thank you.

Mr R.H. COOK: Just going to my previous answer, the other option is that we just leave this up to departments to continue to try to procure separately from around the community. This will drive a significant level of efficiency in the training and development of our workforce because we will do it across a standardised set of practices and with a standardised platform. It will provide a really clear line of sight in terms of our expectations for staff. At some point, we can imagine staff being interested in going off to other opportunities either within government or outside government. Essentially, we will be providing them with a passport to take with them as they seek further career opportunities elsewhere. As the member alluded to, he started his career as a public servant. One of the key roles that the public service plays, of course, is that it provides a lot of people with their first opportunity to practice, particularly when they come straight out of university or, in some cases, straight out of high school or TAFE.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I turn to public sector leadership on page 75 of budget paper No 2. Just in terms of the work practices of the public service overall, has there been any thought in the sector —

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Can I seek to clarify which line item is being referred to?

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am talking about the service area, not a line item.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Is that on page 75? I am just not sure which line item the member is referring to. I am just trying to follow along with the debate.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am actually talking about the service summary on page 74. Public sector leadership, oversight and reporting are the services provided. In terms of the management of the public service, has any thought been given by the commission to the possibility of a four-day working week, which I think has been called for by some of the union associations?

[11.40 am]

Mr R.H. COOK: It will not surprise the chair to hear that I will flick this one to the Public Sector Commissioner to address.

Ms S. O'Neill: The four-day working week is not currently in industrial agreements, but it is important to note that increasing flexibility has been provided to employees over the years with start-finish times, flexitime, if you like, and, in the most recent agreement, flexibility around working from home, which arose largely through COVID-19 and is now embedded as an opportunity. Bringing flexibility into the workplace is discussed with line managers. It is important that agencies balance their business needs against an individual staff member's wish for greater flexibility. In the agreement, just firstly around working from home, there are some requirements to think about regarding the impact on work and the people around them et cetera.

We are aware that some people have been interested in the four-day working week. It has garnered some attention around the national scene. Different people use different definitions of what they mean by a four-day working week. Essentially, it means 100 per cent pay for 80 per cent of the hours. That is the general sentiment around what a four-day working week is. It is a key claim in the current negotiations, as I understand it. We are not responsible—we are not the Industrial Relations Commission—but I do not think any decisions have yet been made about that; it is something of interest. Yet again, with any flexibility, the employer and department heads would need to ensure that the interests of the individuals are considered, alongside other people and the work itself, which is really important. I think it will require a real focus on efficient work practices and the systems et cetera that would be used for that, but we currently have people who work part time. That is not what is intended by the four-day work week. I am aware that there are discussions around it. I am not knowledgeable about whether there is a government position on that as yet. I think it is all subject to further discussions through agreements.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Are there any plans to have a pilot four-day working week program in any part of the public sector?

Mr R.H. COOK: No; no proposal has been put to me.

Mr Y. MUBARAKAI: I refer to page 74 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, under "Significant Issues Impacting the Agency". I refer to paragraph 2, which relates to new training for senior executive service members and chief financial officers. The public sector is a huge provider of procurements across various departments. I was hoping

the Premier could outline for us whether any training programs are to be provided to CFOs in order for them to strengthen their fiscal management processes and procedures across the various sectors and departments.

Mr R.H. COOK: I thank the member very much. I believe that continuing to build the capability and capacity of our public sector workforce is a key part of being part of a strong and effective government. I know just how important it is that the public sector is skilled and capable of delivering the huge range of important services our state needs to be strong and for our individuals and communities to prosper. Behind all our hardworking and dedicated frontline staff are those who do essential but often hidden work to create, deliver and evaluate services to develop policies, programs and such things. Managing finances and contracts is obviously a key part of that. As I said earlier, the initiative is for around 35 000 of our non-frontline public sector staff across nearly 60 agencies. This is a groundbreaking initiative. I am really proud of the work that the government is doing to implement this. It is about aiming to deliver high-quality training at scale that is specifically tailored for the public sector. It is supported by agency heads and will make the sector's approach to training much more cohesive and efficient. It will ensure that we keep the workforce skilled.

We know that the pace of change is significant in the public sector at the moment and the ability to undertake this training is important to make sure that our public service is equipped to deal with the ongoing change we will all have to manage. Strong financial management is a key aspect of that. We need to make sure that we have people with the skills and capabilities to carefully manage the state's finances. These people are basically the chief financial officers right across all agencies. CFOs need high technical skills in financial management, budgeting controls, risks, accountability, analysis, planning and reform. These are critical, not just for each agency, but for the sector overall. It is also important that the CFO in agency A has a single set of skills and language that they can use to engage with the CFO in agency B. Being able to bring a greater level of formalised training is obviously really important.

The program is called "Technical and leadership capabilities for CFOs" and is for every CFO in the public sector right across the state. The first group of 26 CFOs started the leadership training in March this year. It is expected that around 120 current CFOs will complete the program by May 2026 at an estimated cost to agencies of around \$366 600. It essentially works out at just over \$3 000 a head. It is really important. Shaun has just done it. He can vouch for it personally, but I am not sure it comes within the standing orders of estimates for him to give a personal account!

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 73, line item "Item 102 Capital Appropriation" and the \$19 million in 2025–26. Could the Premier explain what that appropriation is for?

Mr R.H. COOK: As I mentioned earlier, the \$19.2 million is essentially the building of the training program. That is front and centre the construction of the platform, the computer interface and other aspects of it. While I get a glass of water, I will ask the Public Sector Commissioner to finish off that answer.

Ms S. O'Neill: I thought the Premier was asking me to get him water!

Yes, in the paper we can see that \$19.2 million is an increase in the 2025–26 out year. It largely reflects the funding for the design and build of the learning initiative that we were talking about before. The Leader of the Opposition would have previously heard the Premier announce \$20 million, so \$19.2 million is for the build. It will be an asset owned by the government. As part of the build, the curriculum will also establish the service operations, the service centre, the technology component and the actual curriculum itself. There are three components that will end up getting built. There is the actual curriculum, the 120 courses; there is the technology platform, which will be administered; and there is the service centre itself. That will become an asset. It gets shown I think on page 77 as an asset. The \$19.2 million that we can see under "Capital" refers to that part of the program.

[11.50 am]

Dr D.J. HONEY: This may be a bit of a stretch, I am not sure, but I am sure the member for Cannington will let us know if it is. I refer to the "Oversight and Reporting" function that is listed on page 76. Is the Public Sector Commissioner able to report to government and ministers on the detail of departments? I will give an example. If the manager of the iron ore division for Rio Tinto were sitting here and somebody asked them how many employees they have, they could very rapidly go into a spreadsheet and see exactly how many FTE positions there are and exactly how many are filled. If they wish, they could see whether people are being interviewed. If they were asked about contractors, they would know exactly how many contractors they have and on the day could say how many contractors they have on site.

My understanding from experience with the Public Sector Commission is that if I were to ask the Public Sector Commissioner or the Premier that question, they would have to go to all the individual departments to assess that information. I certainly think it would go outside the scope here in terms of finances, but it is exactly the same.

For finances in those companies, they can tell someone on any given day their cash flow. That is standard for any large corporate entity in Perth.

The public sector is about the same size as those large mining companies based along the Terrace. They have the same sorts of numbers of employees as, for example, BHP and the like. What reporting functions does the Public Sector Commission have? Does it have a reporting function like that so that it can instantly access that or, in fact, is it required to inquire with individual departments and then try to summarise that information?

Mr R.H. COOK: I will ask the Public Sector Commissioner to respond.

Ms S. O'Neill: First of all, I will say what we do not do: we do not keep the financial data for departments. Treasury would be across that. However, we are responsible for data collections around workforce. We have annual and quarterly workforce data collections based on the human resource minimum obligatory information requirements, the data collection system for government. We have the holdings of a range of workforce data for government.

Part of the member's question sounded like it was about the immediacy of that sort of dashboard arrangement that we could look across. Somewhere in our spending changes table, it will probably refer to our ICT and the streamlined budget that we are using for a program called DirectAccess. What we are trying to do with DirectAccess is exactly what it says: to more directly gain information around workforce in a more timely fashion so that we can have a closer and more immediate look, like the member was talking about, at the FTE and workforce changes. We have been piloting some of that. Part of the issue we have is the number of payroll systems.

We have done a pilot with a few agencies. We have established a technologically safe and lower risk way of gaining the information for them on a fortnightly basis so that we can make better decisions and advise government more readily on changes or information to do with the workforce. That is what we are using our streamlined budgeting for this year, and did in some of last year. As I said, this will enable us to have more timely information, moving from quarterly to fortnightly reporting. Yes, member, we do hold the workforce data. We will put a proposition to government when we have fully investigated how we can do that on a more timely basis—perhaps fortnightly.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Does the Public Sector Commissioner have any role in trying to drive some level of standardisation? My understanding is that we end up having semi-bespoke systems within individual departments. As I said, the public sector is pretty well the same size as BHP or Rio Tinto in terms of the number of employees. One of the reasons they are able to have immediate access to that information is that they have a common platform across the company. There is no question. Everyone complies with that and so on. Is there a role for the Public Sector Commissioner to drive standardised systems across government that easily interface with a platform that aggregates that information more immediately?

Mr R.H. COOK: It is an interesting question. I guess it comes down to need and response. We probably do not have the same needs as, say, a BHP executive for the real-time monitoring of staffing and those sorts of arrangements. From that perspective, the capabilities of the sector are primarily driven by the needs. I certainly know from my experience as the Minister for Health that the attainment of a single platform on human resources is a really important piece of work. In health in particular, we need to have more real-time access to staffing numbers because it makes a material difference on a day-to-day basis to know where staff are deployed right across the sector.

There is certainly a bunch of work going on in those departments that need to have that immediate flow of information. I might ask the Public Sector Commissioner to provide a broader description about those capabilities across the public sector.

Ms S. O'Neill: Trying to get one system together is an option, but the work that we are doing with direct access obviates the need to move to a single system because we will be able to have almost-live real-time workforce data compared with what we have at the moment. That would be the first part of what I would say to that.

Secondly, a little unlike some private sector companies, each director general is, under legislation, the accountable authority for their own operations. They are therefore responsible for their own workforces, obviously under the responsible authority of the minister. I say that for backdrop, but the direct access proposal that we are putting forward means that we will be able to reach in, with all the appropriate security in place, and have exactly what the title says: direct access to the workforce data of each public sector entity.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I have a new question, but it is an old question. We are talking about the \$19 million for the learning initiative. In the statement of financial position on page 79, under the heading "Non-current Assets", there is an intangible entry of \$19.3 million. I assume that is taking that program into account as an intangible non-current asset. That figure drops in the following year. What is the expected life of the platform? I assume that is related to the depreciation of the asset. What is the expected life of that program and the assets that have been developed with it?

Mr R.H. COOK: That essentially accounts for income associated with that particular program. In this case, it is \$19.363 million, which is a little more than \$19.2 million. It is essentially for money coming in for the build. In the subsequent years, there is \$15.509 million and \$11.655 million. That is essentially the money that will come into the Public Sector Commission from other departments to purchase the courses that come from it. It is a non-current asset. I hope I am explaining this the way the Public Sector Commissioner wanted me to. There are three components. I am going to hand over to the Public Sector Commissioner.

Ms S. O'Neill: For clarity, there are three components. There is the \$19.2 million—although it is probably expressed as slightly more there for an accounting purpose. It is a one-off one-year payment to build the 120 courses. They are concrete assets that we will have. Then there is the contribution of agencies that will continue to run the process, digital platform and the learning services partner, so there are some staff there. Then, as the Premier pointed out, the agencies will pay for courses. At this point, those courses have been developed in a way that would be better than private sector buying-in of courses. We are looking for an efficient high-quality result. It is a five-year program. I think the question was: over what period? In the first instance, I should say, the commitment is over the forward estimates, because that is what we have in front of us.

[12 noon]

Ms J.J. SHAW: I refer to page 76 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, under “Oversight and Reporting” in relation to policies to improve public administration. I enjoyed the discussion today on the efforts we are making to enhance public sector capability; it is important to good government. Can the Premier provide more information on how the government is ensuring that public services are delivered efficiently, effectively and by a stable public sector workforce?

Mr R.H. COOK: I appreciate the member for Swan Hills’ question. My government believes in the public sector. We believe that it changes lives, supports vulnerable communities and improves the economy. Having a stable public sector and secure Western Australian public sector jobs remains a key priority. It is about making sure that we provide great, rewarding jobs for them through training, workforce development, career progression and so on. The government has made strong policy decisions to bring about change as part of the WA Labor government agenda. We have brought services back into government in a number of agencies. Of course, I oversaw the decision to bring back into the public sector a number of services at Fiona Stanley Hospital and the entire operations at Peel Health Campus. Since 2017, more than 80 per cent of jobs created in the public sector have been frontline service jobs, including 4 400 nurses, 1 600 doctors and more than 1 700 teachers. This is important; it means that government investment in the workforce is going directly towards those critical frontline services.

One example I want to highlight that our government is particularly proud of is the return of maintenance contractors back in house in Main Roads Western Australia. This is providing incredible outcomes and ensuring great road building and repair capabilities; however, it is also about creating local jobs. Since October 2022, more than 400 maintenance workers have transitioned back into employment at Main Roads, including 48 in the wheatbelt, 50 in the midwest–Gascoyne, 26 in goldfields–Esperance, 31 in the Pilbara, 61 in the south west and 39 in the great southern. Rather than engaging private companies to bring in workers, predominantly outside the region or outside a community, this is about employing locals to do that work. We see that writ large in Fitzroy Crossing where, as a result of the Fitzroy Crossing Bridge reconstruction, there is now a ready-made workforce who can take on other roles, particularly road maintenance functions, which were outsourced by the Liberal–National government in the 1990s.

Just last week the shadow Treasurer talked about the number of public servants. It was a key critique from those opposite about the public service and public sector services. We have seen in clear detail that the agenda for those opposite is to cut public service jobs. It is important that everyone understands exactly what those on the other side have committed to by virtue of their critique of our government. They are saying that there are too many public servants. The only way to get rid of public servants is through privatisation or sacking people. This government is committed to continuing to build our public services across the public sector. As I said, I am immensely proud of the work we have done reversing privatisation decisions in the health services, and we make no apology for that.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to public sector leadership on page 75 under “Services and Key Efficiency Indicators”. The Public Sector Commissioner states in the Public Sector Commission’s annual report 2022–23 —

Over the year we have initiated a number of strategies including igniting actions to fix the workplace not the women ...

Can the commissioner, through the Premier, expand on what that means?

Mr R.H. COOK: I will ask the Public Sector Commissioner to respond.

Ms S. O'Neill: We have undertaken a fair bit of research, mostly over the past 18 months, to dig into the problems that women face around promotion in not only the public sector, but also the broader employment market. I think we mentioned last year that we have reached the 50 per cent target for women in senior executive service levels, which is terrific. We undertook expansive research to see where women generally find they have issues with ongoing promotion. The sentiment in the line we used there is that this is not about having to do something to the women to make them be different or better—they are great as they are—but more about looking at structural problems in the workplace that might have them not achieve promotion at the same rate as men. We built some specific personas based on our data. It showed that at about level 5—often around the age that women might be starting to have children, if they choose that route—women start to fall behind. In fact, the rate of promotion is impacted from that point. That is what the statement is looking at. It is saying to the sector that we need to look at our workplaces to see whether there are structural problems in terms of discrimination or lack of support for women.

With the agreement of government, we introduced the women in executive leadership program. Last financial year, we had 26 more junior women involved—we will do it again this financial year—to whom we gave the opportunity to sit around the executive table and learn about what it means to be in a corporate governance role. This is because in part they have difficulty getting that experience, but it was also saying to the sector to look closely at its diversity data and see whether there are any structural problems in the workplace that get in the way of women. Flexibility has been particularly important and looking at whether people can work part-time in the more senior levels. The sentiment of the line the member read out was around: this is not a problem for women to fix; it is a problem for public sector employers to look at what is happening inside each of the workplaces. We are pleased with the work of the 26 people. That is only a microcosm of the whole program—an example of the program—and there is more work to be done in this space. The public sector is largely women—I think 70 per cent are women—but that is not as represented in the senior tiers, so we continue to work on that.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I have a question not just on sexual harassment and gender issues, but more broadly about the public service and the bullying that might occur in a workplace. If a senior person was using somebody's Italian surname to make fun of them, would that be considered acceptable in the public service? If it was not considered acceptable, what disciplinary action might the public service take against a senior person who was making fun of the Italian surname of, say, a work colleague or another person in the workplace? Would that be considered acceptable or would action be taken against a person in that situation?

Ms S. O'Neill: Harassment and discrimination of any kind in the public sector is unacceptable. Unfortunately, from time to time, whether it is using an Italian name or something else, people do not behave in the way we would want them to. In the last financial year, we issued a new commissioner's instruction around ethical foundations that sets out the standards of behaviour that we would want people to have. Agencies are now required to build a code of conduct for their agency to align with the expected behaviours of the public sector. From there, normal discipline measures would be applied if someone was found to have undertaken that sort of behaviour.

[12.10 pm]

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: If a person doubled down and argued that criticism of their behaviour was not fair, is it correct that the discipline process could lead to termination?

Mr R.H. COOK: The Public Sector Commissioner.

Ms S. O'Neill: Before getting to that point, there would need to be an investigation to determine whether it meets the standard or discipline. Under the Public Sector Management Act 1994, seven or eight penalties could apply, right up to dismissal. It is really important that employers take this issue seriously and apply the controls, discipline mechanisms and penalties available to them.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to page 80 and the statement of cash flows. The bottom line reveals quite substantial cash assets at the end of the reporting period, hovering around \$15 million. Why does the Public Sector Commission need such substantial cash reserves at its disposal?

Mr R.H. COOK: I am advised that the net increase or decrease in cash held represents the total cash received less total cash payments for the period. It indicates whether the commission has spent more or less than receipts received during the year. The 2022–23 actual, the decrease in cash held in 2022–23, primarily reflects the impact from the reduction of service appropriations due to the higher than usual number of position vacancies during the first half of 2022–23 that may have taken longer than usual to fill and deferment of the completion of projects, such as the agency executive management system. The 2023–24 estimated actual, the decrease in cash held, primarily reflects the delivery of the first two chief finance officer leadership development program modules, funded by the commission's existing cash reserves. Primarily, the cash reserves themselves are held against leave entitlements that may be taken in the following financial year.

The appropriation was recommended.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A — Tuesday, 21 May 2024]

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Mr Peter Rundle; Mr Roger Cook; Mr Bill Johnston; Dr David Honey; Mr Shane Love; Mr Yaz Mubarakai; Ms
Jessica Shaw
