

Division 36: Communities — Volunteering, \$2 121 566 000 —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Minister for Volunteering.

Mr M. Rowe, Director General.

Mr M. Goff, Policy Adviser.

Mr M. Crevola, Chief Financial Officer.

Mr M. Richardson, Director, Management Accounting.

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

[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 close of business Friday, 1 October 2021. 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.

Member for Roe.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to line item "Volunteering WA Digital Platform" under "Election Commitments" halfway down page 514 in volume 2 of budget paper No 2. Can the minister explain why the funding tapers off from \$100 000 in this budget estimate period down to \$45 000 and then to \$15 000 in each of the last two forward estimates.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thank you, member, for the question. That item is an election commitment that we took to the last election. It is not a recurrent spending arrangement. It is a one-off commitment of \$175 000 for Volunteering WA to develop a statewide digital platform that supports the coordination of emergency volunteering. The member will be aware that when something dramatic or an emergency happens in his electorate, many people are keen to support the cause and chip in to offer assistance in some way. Often that is difficult to coordinate. It presents its own logistical challenge to local governments, which can often be small local governments in regional areas especially, as the member will know. It is a difficult issue because Western Australians are very generous and quick to lend a hand. The commitment is to create an online platform where people can offer their services and that can be coordinated. We are developing a plan with Volunteering WA to look at how we can improve our digital presence in response to coordinating emergency volunteers. I think there is a phrase for it—spontaneous volunteering. When something happens and many people in the community want to help, it is a wonderful thing, but it can often be difficult to manage or get the best out of those wonderful offers from volunteers. We hope that this is a way to better coordinate that assistance to result in positive action.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Does this platform extend across the base volunteer organisations such as the volunteer bush fire brigades? What areas does it cover?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: As I described earlier, it covers more of the spontaneous response from people who often volunteer. The administration or the coordination of volunteer emergency responders, whether they are from a bush fire brigade, the volunteer fires and rescue service or the State Emergency Service, is already coordinated by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and their lines of operation are already clear. This is more about people who may not have volunteered before and want to lend a hand. We saw it happen this year with the Wooroloo bushfire and cyclone Seroja when people asked how they could help out or get involved. This is a way of streamlining that response online. Things are yet to be worked out, but I would imagine that people would put online a description of themselves, their capabilities and the areas that they want to lend a hand in, and that information would then be passed on to organisations that could use that assistance. At present the response is ad hoc with people calling the police or the local council or fire station. This online platform would reduce and streamline the impact of that load of calls from people who want to make a positive contribution.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I refer to page 517. Paragraph 13 states —

The Department will provide \$175,000 in funding under the Volunteering Platform and Technology Improvement initiative ... and explore benefits and improvements to Volunteering WA's volunteer database ...

How will that assist smaller remote communities whose volunteers are burnt out?

I will give Coral Bay as a very good example of volunteer burnout. The population at Coral Bay can be up to 7 000 people at any one time. There are businesses who help those 7 000 people enjoy Coral Bay. In the past, there have been volunteers who have not had the adequate time to save lives. There are no police to assist, so it is often one or two volunteers or the community that helps get behind the ambulance volunteers. Another situation we had was that a month ago in Carnarvon, for the first time, St John could not respond to a call-out. It was the first time in the history of St John in Carnarvon that it could not respond to a call-out, and it was simply because there were not the volunteers to carry out work for the ambulances. The same thing happens in Cue and Mt Magnet where volunteers are scarce. Often, given the health system is not adequate enough to cater for the community, these volunteers travel hundreds and hundreds of kilometres to transfer patients to, say, Geraldton from Cue or from Cue to Meekatharra. It is dangerous and exhausting for these volunteers. What is the government doing to try to grow the volunteer base, noting that there is an ageing population in these communities? Has the government thought about any financial remuneration to entice younger people to take up volunteering, particularly ambulance volunteers?

[5.10 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I thank the member for the question. The member has drawn together a number of issues that do not necessarily sit under this line in the budget, which is about the better coordination of spontaneous volunteering, but I am happy to respond to his question about the greater challenge more globally of how to get more people to volunteer. The member is right that it is an issue, and I think it is an issue in modern society right across Australia and perhaps the world, where people have busy lives. How do we engage people? It is fair to say that many volunteers are of senior years and during COVID they left volunteering because of concerns for their health and wanting to take the medical advice to stay home and protect themselves. There has been an issue with getting those people back into the volunteering space now that they have left. That is one issue. The other issue the member raised was how to engage young people. It is something we are always keen to do.

The member mentioned that there could be some incentive. I am not sure that incentive payments are really the motivation for people who volunteer. I travel right across the state and I know that in some ways if we were to approach some volunteers with an offer of payment, they would take a very ill view of it because they are very much people who want to contribute and give to their local communities without reimbursement or compensation. It is something they want to offer without anything in return. I am not sure that a financial incentive is always the way to go. However, in numerous ways the state makes it easier and less expensive for volunteers. I know those seeking certification to work in volunteer capacities get heavily subsidised fees when applying for police clearances and other documentation. That is one way that we try to make it less expensive for people to offer their volunteer services.

The member also commented on an issue, which we are very aware of too, of the challenge in regions with lower populations. Obviously, in large population centres there are more people available to volunteer. In many country towns there are what are called “cross-dressers”; the member would be familiar with that term. It is the volunteer who puts a blue shirt one moment to fight a fire and then a green shirt at another to drive the volunteer ambulance. We ask a lot of volunteers generally, but particularly in the regions. We are trying to make it easier to volunteer. We are very keen, through Volunteering WA, to promote the idea of volunteering. Having a greater online resource that allows people to connect when there is an incident will have a positive outcome. Once someone volunteers and has that experience for the first time, which they are likely to get through spontaneous volunteering, they are introduced to the world of volunteering. They are likely to come back for more, and the hope would be that they make that volunteering arrangement more ongoing.

The CHAIR: The member's question was rather lengthy. Could he keep his questions a little bit more concise and directed at a particular item? We are discussing a very important topic, and I am quite happy to give the member bit of leeway, as long as the minister is comfortable with responding to those sorts of questions. It was a fairly broad-ranging one, but a very important one.

The appropriation was recommended.