

VACSWIM — ALBANY

Grievance

MS R.S. STEPHENS (Albany) [9.17 am]: I rise today to raise a grievance with the Minister for Education concerning the VacSwim program in the Albany electorate. I thank the minister for taking my grievance and for the opportunity to bring to the attention of the house the practical, life-affirming, well-founded, safety-first program that is VacSwim.

The Department of Education delivers VacSwim programs at over 170 closed and open water venues, including surf venues, across the state. A recent review of open water locations undertaken by the Department of Education identified a small number of venues, including two beaches in my Albany electorate—Cosy Corner and Cape Riche—where appropriate risk mitigation strategies could reportedly not be implemented. The Department of Education made the decision to cease summer VacSwim programs at Cosy Corner and Cape Riche due to the cited multiple risks associated with students learning to swim in unpatrolled open waters.

As a born and bred member for Albany, I grew up swimming at Binalup, Middleton Beach. One of my first jobs was a swimming teacher for VacSwim, followed by program coordinator for Surf Life Saving WA, where I coordinated the delivery of beach activities for the schools by assessing the risk of delivery. I wholeheartedly know the benefits and the challenges of teaching kids to swim in open water. That is why I have worked so hard to make sure that any review of the VacSwim program in my electorate, which has so many incredible stretches of coastline where people can swim, play and surf, included the views and feedback of my constituents.

As background, over the 2022–23 Christmas holidays, summer VacSwim lessons were delivered to 36 children at Cosy Corner and 29 children at Cape Riche. That is 65 children altogether and 65 families that otherwise would not have had opportunities to visit the coast, learn about safe open-water swimming and enjoy the company of other families if these lessons had been cancelled. This is particularly relevant for those families that attend Cape Riche VacSwim lessons. For those families, VacSwim not only represents an opportunity for kids to learn to swim, but also an opportunity to socialise, share experiences and network with others post-harvest. In the words of one of my constituents, these swimming lessons are a huge part of their small community. People plan their summer holidays around these lessons. To have to travel to Bremer Bay is an hour, and it is an hour more to Albany each way, which is a huge ask.

Another constituent said she believed that it was hard for people to comprehend the kilometres these children travel to get to school to music lessons, doctors' appointments or even a swimming lesson. She said it was really hard living where they do, really isolating, and it was getting harder. Fatigue in arguing these issues is wearing the community down. She urged the government to please take this seriously, as the community seems to be continually told it is just a numbers game. The community knows how isolated it is. The constituent added that it would be nice if it were not a fight to keep something in their communities. As an older parent, she said she could see that mothers of these smaller children would just move to Albany, leaving fathers on the farms and businesses alone. That would not be good for anyone, especially family and community.

We can hear how desperate my constituents are to retain the VacSwim lessons because they are not just about swimming; they are part of a scaffold that keeps communities together, engaged and active. They are just one necessary element of the critical social infrastructure that keeps regional communities alive. My understanding of the facts that informed the department's decision to consider cancelling VacSwim at Cosy Corner and Cape Riche included: one, the venue being uncontrolled, with limited access to emergency services; two, the department staff managing risk associated with sharing the beach venue with members of the public; and, three, previous incidents having placed students and instructors at risk. As a result, my community provided feedback to me regarding the decision to cancel the lessons. The minister requested that the department seek further independent advice, and I thank him for this. After seeking advice, including from WorkSafe WA, the department determined to contract an external organisation that specialises in risk assessment to conduct an independent review, which resulted in an external consultant engaged to undertake the review. As soon as I learnt that the department had written to my constituents, my office proactively engaged with them on an individual and community-wide basis. We received emails, phone calls and in-person visits from constituents unhappy with the decision on VacSwim, and I decided to advocate on their behalf because I know how important the VacSwim program is, particularly in regional communities.

On 8 June, my office visited Wellstead and listened to the views and solutions put forward by that community as part of their efforts to retain the VacSwim lessons at Cape Riche. A strong contingent of locals made their position very clear. They were there to fight for what they see as a positive, beneficial outcome for their community that guarantees ongoing access to VacSwim. It was also clear that it is a community of doers. Its members are used to fighting for the survival of their small community. On 21 July, I was back in Wellstead again to meet with the community to discuss the VacSwim review. Following my visit to Wellstead Primary School, where I delivered a civics presentation, all the students wrote to the minister, which was really heartwarming. My office continued to field calls, emails and visits from supporters of VacSwim at both Cosy Corner and Cape Riche, and I also discussed

the matter and possible solutions with the City of Albany. Emails were sent to a core group of active local constituents again in mid-August updating them on the progress of the review pending the report and its recommendations. As part of the review, I met with VacSwim program reviewers to provide input and to ensure that all that I had heard from my constituents on the issue was fed back to the reviewers.

I understand that the review is now complete and the report is finalised, and I thank the minister for the opportunity to be involved on behalf of my community. Enrolments for the 2023–24 VacSwim season opened on 26 July, and enrolments are currently still being accepted. My office continues to provide responses to concerned constituents. Can the minister please update the house about the status of the much-loved VacSwim program in the electorate of Albany?

DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale — Minister for Education) [9.23 am]: I would very much like to respond to the grievance made by the member for Albany, and I thank her for it. She is a great local member and advocate for her local community. If anyone wants to write a textbook about how to be an effective local member, the way that the member for Albany has progressed this matter is a great case study, so well done, member.

By way of background, we would have all grown up either learning to swim through vacation swimming or in-term swimming, and the Cook Labor government acknowledges and recognises the importance of learning to swim. For anyone living in Australia or Western Australia it is an incredibly important and essential skill. Of course, it is very important that we have programs that allow people to learn about water safety and to have a competent level of swimming.

In 2022, the department identified significant safety concerns at three locations. The member mentioned Cosy Corner and Cape Riche, and also Starvation Bay in the electorate of the member for Roe. Although we have a focus on ensuring that kids learn to swim, it has to be done in a safe environment. It is just common sense that if people are to be taught to swim and about water safety, it has to be done in a safe environment. The concerns the department identified were limited access to emergency response services, limited mobile phone services and no access to sea rescue. There were also public interface issues, such as motor vehicles on the beach near the location of the lessons and the public discarding bait in the vicinity. If the new Nationals WA member in the Legislative Council had her way, there would also probably be whale carcasses nearby. The department undertook consultation with surf life saving clubs, sea rescue centres and ambulance sub-centres. Having formed the opinion that the identified risks could not be mitigated, the decision was reluctantly made to cease delivering programs at those three locations. It was done based on safety concerns. That position was not taken lightly. As I mentioned before, we know the value of the need to swim. The VacSwim program is incredibly important to families, particularly in the great southern region where many homes are in coastal regions and the beaches are the envy of the world over. People like to swim on the foreshore along the coastline.

Following the decision by the department, the member for Albany raised her concerns to me a number of times, and made a number of productive suggestions. She did not just whinge; she raised the concerns of her community and came up with some possible alternatives and suggestions. That is what a good local member does. They do not just whinge and criticise; they come up with alternatives and suggestions. They were welcomed by me as Minister for Education and also the department. The member for Albany relayed the concerns of her community, which expressed deep disappointment with the decision, and she strongly advocated for me to see what we could do to ensure the program could continue but in a safe environment. As a result of the community feedback that the member for Albany gathered about the decision, I requested that the decision-makers seek further advice about how we could allow the program to still run in these areas safely.

The department determined to contract an external organiser specialising in risk assessments to conduct an independent review. I must say that it was a very thorough review and it was undertaken in a very timely manner. It was encouraging because it provided a way forward for the three programs, at Cosy Corner, Cape Riche and Starvation Bay, but with a number of conditions that needed to be met. The review report contained a number of recommendations to mitigate the risks associated with these venues under four broad themes: one, training, onboarding and induction processes; two, first aid training, site set-up and teaching equipment; three, processes for risk assessments, regular support, a review of incidents and control for continuous improvements; and, four, signage and regular maintenance of existing infrastructure. For these programs to continue the associated risk mitigation is not just the responsibility of the Department of Education; it also lies with local governments, so the City of Albany and the Shire of Ravensthorpe. I wrote to the CEOs of the City of Albany and the Shire of Ravensthorpe requesting their support for implementing these recommendations. The member for Albany was very proactive in making representation to the City of Albany to ensure they understood their responsibilities and the importance of continuing these programs. I am happy to inform the house, particularly the member for Albany, that the City of Albany indicated its very strong support for the recommendations and its responsibilities. I have also been advised that the Shire of Ravensthorpe is similarly supportive, member for Roe.

The results we have from this process, through the constant positive advocacy of the member for Albany, is that we have reinstated the VacSwim program in Cosy Corner, Cape Riche and—the member for Roe will be happy—

Starvation Bay. These three sites created real challenges and the department only decided that the program would cease because of the dangers.

Ms L. Mettam: Time.

Dr A.D. BUTI: Through the member for Albany's great advocacy, we are now able to continue those programs. Enrolments have been continuing and VacSwim will continue —

Ms L. Mettam: You're out of time.

Dr A.D. BUTI: — in Cosy Corner, Cape Riche and Starvation Bay.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you.

Dr A.D. BUTI: It is very positive! What is the member's problem? It is not all negative!