

STUDENT ASSISTANCE PAYMENT

Motion

HON SANDRA CARR (Agricultural) [11.31 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house notes the Cook government’s announcement of a WA student assistance payment and other initiatives that are providing cost-of-living support for Western Australians.

I rise today to discuss the Cook Labor government’s great work in addressing the cost of living. The cost of living is, of course, a very human story; we are talking about the lives of everyday people and the struggles that they face, and particularly some of the more vulnerable groups in our community. Not many of us would have been immune to that at some stage in our lives; some of us are perhaps very blessed and have not had any real financial struggles—that real concern about whether you will have a roof over your head or enough to feed your family, and, if you do, whether it will be good, nutritious, substantive food. Thinking about this motion today reminded me of a couple of stories from my own family. I thought I would start with very human stories, because human stories are really what should drive a lot of what we do. They are certainly what drives the Cook government to address the cost of living; we are looking after people.

My mum shared a story with me from when I was a child. I do not really remember this; in fact, I do not even remember feeling like we did not have enough, but she was talking to me as an adult about how little money she had when I was a kid. She never spent anything on herself, and I know she still struggles with that. I often take her shopping and push her to buy things and she thinks I am the devil, but I like to shop; I am not even going to pretend I do not! I also like to see other people buying things for themselves, because I think we all deserve to be able to have something in reserve to spend on ourselves.

My mum shared a story about when we were kids and my parents were really struggling for money. My dad was between jobs. Just once, my mum decided to splash out and buy something for herself. The thing she splashed out on was a can of aerosol deodorant; she thought that was really, really special. It was a luxury that she normally could not afford. The first day she went to use it, she dropped the can and it landed on its nozzle, burst and emptied itself of its contents. She shared the story of just how completely gutted she was because, A, she had had this one little splash-out or splurge for herself, and, B, she saw it as wasted money. Obviously, the story of my family improves from there on because my parents are really hard workers. They were both working throughout my life and have done a great job in providing for us very well.

I remember another story that my dad told me about talking to one of his much older colleagues when he was still working. He was talking to him about the struggle of having kids in high school and a daughter at university, and of feeling like the struggle would never end and that there was no light at the end of the tunnel. His old mate told him, “It gets better.” There was that perseverance and that good old Aussie resilience.

I think those human stories are really important because they help to ground us in the importance of the Cook government’s cost-of-living initiatives. WA’s economy is really strong, thanks to the fantastic financial management of the Cook government. That allows us to do things like our recent announcement of the WA student assistance payment. I was really pleased to hear about that, because school and education are such important parts of young people’s lives and opportunities, as was clear in the story I just told about my parents struggling with two kids in high school and one at university, and the sacrifices they made for our education.

The WA student assistance payment for every student, from kindergarten right through to year 12, is so important. It will provide amazing support for families to make sure that life is that little bit easier and that they have some money to ensure that their mortgage or rent and food can be paid for. It is a \$250 payment for every secondary student and \$150 for every primary and kindergarten student. It is part of our \$103.5 million package to reduce the pressure of school expenses for parents as part of our 2024–25 state budget. It is a real commitment to make sure that life is a bit easier for WA families. It will complement the student assistance scheme, which remains in place for eligible low-income families with children at secondary school. That additional payment for people who are struggling will help just a bit more.

The Cook government has also doubled the KidSport vouchers. We know that access to sport is so important for the physical and mental health, connection and social inclusion of our young people. Ensuring that young people can access sport is important, and it is so good to see that the Cook government is committed to making sure that our young people can access those opportunities for the social inclusion and wellbeing that they bring.

I would also like to note that Cook Labor government members of Parliament care deeply about making sure that these opportunities can be accessed by young people. That is why the government and the member for Geraldton, Lara Dalton, is supporting the JK Foundation’s sport assistance program to help young athletes access sporting opportunities. For those who do not know, JK—obviously, Josh Kennedy; I am sure most members know exactly

Hon Sandra Carr; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon Stephen Pratt; Hon Darren West; Hon Ayor Makur Chuot; Hon Klara Andric

what I mean when I say “JK”!—runs his foundation to reduce the barriers experienced by regional young people who wish to pursue pathways in sport. It is all about helping them with travel costs, coaching and mentoring—all the financial barriers that regional athletes experience a little more intensely than athletes in the metro area.

These are young athletes like Geraldton student Khyan Townsend, who was selected to represent Australia at the World Taekwondo Championships in Kazakhstan last year—something that would have been incredibly challenging for a family to allow a young family member to participate in. Khyan got to go to that, thanks to the JK Foundation and support from people like Lara Dalton, the member for Geraldton.

We are also helping TAFE students. We introduced fee-free TAFE courses and they will continue this year, with more than 130 fee-free TAFE qualifications available. The most popular uptake has been in the health and care sector, which is fantastic, because we know there is really high demand for those roles. Creating that opportunity for people to participate in those courses cost-free means that we are not only helping people with the cost of living, but also ensuring a future workforce because people will be able to access those courses. If members are wondering how successful it is, more than 39 000 enrolments were recorded for 2023. There is really great uptake, and that is making a real, genuine impact. I know this, because my son enrolled in one of those courses, which allowed him to build some skills. He did his course in cooking, which has been fantastic for me, because now he cooks my food! I am extra appreciative of that cost-of-living assistance!

There are also other initiatives. I mentioned that Cook Labor government members of Parliament are committed to supporting people by helping them with their qualifications moving forward. Again, along with Lara Dalton, MLA, the member for Geraldton, we recently paid the registration fees for Geraldton Universities Centre nursing graduates, to allow them to cover some of the costs of transitioning into the workforce. For those who are not aware, nursing students have to spend the last part of their degree doing unpaid pracs in hospitals. That is quite challenging for some of those people, who throughout their degree are often working while studying. Helping to pay for things like their registration fees makes a genuine difference.

We have also more than doubled the regional travel allowance for families trying to get their kids to school. The Cook government is making genuine efforts to make sure that if students in regional areas do not have access to the orange buses, it is helping families with the cost of getting students to school. Lots of great work is being done in supporting education and making sure we help families to educate our young people and provide bright futures for them.

Speaking of bright futures, the Cook government has been providing household electricity credits since 2020.

Hon Kyle McGinn: So many things!

Hon SANDRA CARR: There are so many good things, Hon Kyle McGinn; I agree. Thank you for your enthusiastic support. The household electricity credits have been incredibly important for Western Australian families experiencing cost-of-living challenges, some of which, like interest rates on mortgages, are outside the control of the WA government. The extra bits of assistance create a fantastic opportunity for people to feel a bit of cost relief.

Moreover, the Minister for Small Business, Hon Jackie Jarvis—a big performer though—recently announced the expansion of the \$650 energy bill relief program for small businesses and charities. I said that I would keep the stories fairly personal, so I will share that my sister has run a small business for more than a decade. I am acutely aware of some of the costs and struggles of small business owners. They are often the last person to get paid if there is anything left at the end of running a business. It is really challenging, and that is why things like the regional economic development grants are also fantastic; they allow small businesses to grow and develop and ensure that they can maximise employment opportunities for their communities.

The Cook government has been doing more to assist with the cost of living, in particular for metropolitan and regional travel. Regional people have the regional airfare cap, which has been a fantastic initiative. People have so many reasons that they need to leave their regional communities and head to Perth.

Hon Kyle McGinn interjected.

Hon SANDRA CARR: Hon Kyle McGinn is absolutely right. It has made a huge difference to the cost of air travel for regional people. I have heard many stories from people who have talked about how much it has improved the opportunity for them to access services and appointments, and to see family members who are based in metropolitan areas. It has made life a lot easier for them, so that is something the Cook government is particularly proud of.

Also, for metropolitan people, or for when regional people get to the metropolitan area, there is the two-zone fare cap for public transport. We made public transport free for school students and free on Sundays. These are all great initiatives to help people move around the city and the state much more cheaply than they would previously have been able to. I would also like to remind everyone of the summer of free public transport, another fantastic initiative. In the first week alone, that was taken up by more than one million SmartRider holders. It was obviously incredibly successful. It had the added side bonus of encouraging people to make regular use of public transport and, therefore,

reduce their carbon footprint. It had some flow-on benefits to the overall community in encouraging people to use public transport.

I would also like to mention some of the work that the Cook government has been doing to improve the cost of living for seniors. We have boosted the seniors' cost-of-living rebate. I would also like to acknowledge the great work of our Minister for Housing, John Carey, and his flexible-thinking approach to the challenge of housing.

Hon Neil Thomson interjected.

Hon SANDRA CARR: I will repeat that, honourable member, because I am not taking interjections. I listen to your speeches and try to decipher them. You can listen to mine. Minister Carey's flexible approach —

Hon Neil Thomson interjected.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Steve Martin): Members, I am struggling to hear the remarks of Hon Sandra Carr.

Hon SANDRA CARR: Thank you for your protection, Acting President. I was trying to tell members, if they would listen, about the wonderful work of Minister for Housing Carey. He has a flexible-thinking approach and the ability to adapt and find solutions and to embrace them. His innovative and creative approach has manifested in the form of the four small prefabricated homes for vulnerable seniors in Spearwood. He saw an opportunity to provide them and see how they work for seniors. I think that is a fantastic initiative. I have always thought that small and tiny homes are a really good opportunity for people who wish to take them up, and I am really glad to see Minister Carey being equally innovative and creative in finding solutions.

We have also introduced the WA rent relief program to help financially vulnerable tenants at risk of eviction.

Hon Neil Thomson interjected.

Hon SANDRA CARR: Honourable member, I know that you do not care about people at risk of eviction, but I would like to tell you what we are doing while you sit there and criticise.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Members, please direct your remarks through the chair. Thank you.

Hon SANDRA CARR: Thank you, Acting President, for the reminder.

We have provided financial assistance of up to \$5 000 for vulnerable tenants at risk of eviction, a great initiative to help people out when times have become particularly challenging. Yesterday, Minister Carey also announced a further increase to the income eligibility limits for social housing, which is another way we are addressing the rising cost of living and helping to ensure people can remain eligible for social housing. It addresses the changing global circumstances that we are all facing. As much as members across the floor would like to localise it, that is simply not the case. That is disingenuous, and I would even go so far as to say dishonest.

I would also like to identify the recent announcement—I believe it was yesterday or the day before—that we have added more than 2 000 social homes, and more than 1 000 other social homes are currently under contract or construction. Genuine fast-tracked steps are being taken to make sure that people can have a roof over their heads and stay in their houses. We are doing everything we can, and I think that is in stark contrast to the complete lack of ideas and opportunities being provided by anyone else.

HON KYLE MCGINN (Mining and Pastoral — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.46 am]: I will be responding on behalf of the government to the fantastic motion from Hon Sandra Carr. I also congratulate Hon Sandra Carr and the member for Geraldton, Lara Dalton, MLA, who do a fantastic job in their region. I think that what Hon Sandra Carr has just laid out and has been doing to support her community on the cost of living is fantastic. It is good to see, finally, a hardworking member in Geraldton. It is fantastic to see that area getting great representation from the upper house and from the member in the lower house.

As we know, global events have led to many things, such as interest rate rises, and to big housing and cost-of-living pressures. Those pressures have been rising around the world. Here in WA, the Cook government understands that cost-of-living pressures are being experienced by Western Australians, which is why we are providing cost-of-living relief through a range of measures. Hon Sandra Carr has gone through some of them already, but I will take members through what a good Labor government does to address the cost of living in Western Australia.

We have seen inflationary pressures, supply chain shortages and high interest rates around the world. Through our strong economy and responsible budget management, the WA government has been able to provide support to those who need it, and we expect and hope that the situation will dissipate over time. We are always looking for ways to help Western Australian families who are doing it tough and to provide additional support to those who need it the most. With our electricity credits for every single home, we have made bills more affordable. We have capped train fares, bus fares and regional airfares, and we are boosting housing supply.

Hon Sandra Carr; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon Stephen Pratt; Hon Darren West; Hon Ayor
Makur Chuot; Hon Klara Andric

One of my favourites is that we are delivering free TAFE courses to train Western Australians for the jobs of today and tomorrow. I am so proud of what the Cook government does in the TAFE sector. It has turned it around from the absolute disaster of the previous government.

We continue to deliver on our commitment to keep fees and charges low, with the household basket of fees and charges increasing by just 2.4 per cent from 1 July 2023.

On the weekend was the fantastic announcement of the WA student assistance payment, which will provide \$250 for every secondary school student and \$150 for primary and kindergarten students to help families with school expenses—real help. This will help every family cover the extra costs that come with having a kid in school—something that families are absolutely crying out for. We have primary school students in the public gallery from Sutherland Dianella Primary School. Thank you very much. We are talking about real relief for families. This direct payment to families will hopefully take pressure off where it is needed most. The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, which represents the P&C associations, noted on its Facebook page that —

The program will assist parents with the cost of school essentials—like books and IT equipment, sport and music costs, stationery, school shoes, uniforms, excursions and camps ...

It was fantastic to hear that from the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations.

It seems that the announcement has been received quite well by almost the whole community, apart from the Liberal Party. Let us not forget that when the state government announced its electricity bill credits to all Western Australian households, Hon Dr Steve Thomas labelled them as “untargeted cash handouts”. Now, Liberal leader Libby Mettam has called the school assistance payment lazy and has called on household fees and charges to be frozen. Governments have frozen those fees and charges before. Can members guess what happened the last time a government did that? It failed. All that a freeze achieves is to push those increases to fees and charges down the road. The cost of delivering services increases each year. If Hon Neil Thomson took the time to educate himself on this, he would find that if prices are frozen, it will leave a gap for the next year and the year after. That means that funding must come from somewhere else—for instance, higher taxes, lower spending on services or bigger increases in future years—to make up the difference. The general principle for budgeting across government is that prices should generally recover costs. A former Liberal leader understood this. Colin Barnett told *The West Australian* in April 2010 —

“It is going to be a (tough Budget) and increases in charges are part of getting to a situation where users of electricity, gas and water pay the real cost of providing those services and to make sure that those utilities have the ability to make investment in future supply,” ...

Later on, he blamed the decision to freeze those tariffs for saddling the energy utilities and taxpayers with more than a billion dollars of debt. It is fantastic that the honourable member over there suggested that we freeze fees and charges, yet that has already been proven not to work and saddled taxpayers with over a billion dollars’ worth of debt! I think it is fantastic that the policy Hon Neil Thomson suggested has already failed under a Liberal government. Under the previous Liberal–National government, household electricity prices rose by an average of 8.4 per cent per annum for eight years—a 90 per cent increase over its two terms in government. Household water prices increased by an average of almost seven per cent per annum. To top it off, the Liberal–National government left us with a budget predicated on a seven per cent rise in electricity costs and a six per cent rise in water costs, on top of net debt being on a path to \$44 billion. If lower increases in fees and charges had been assumed, it would have made the state’s finances look even worse.

The Cook government is approaching the cost of living sensibly. One-off credits and cost-of-living relief through a range of measures can be delivered to provide a bigger and more targeted boost. We have committed over \$700 million towards measures for cost-of-living relief in the 2023–24 budget. The government delivered its second electricity bill credit of \$200 to Western Australian households in late December. The honourable member should listen to this, as he will be very proud to know that the community is getting real cost-of-living relief.

Hon Neil Thomson interjected.

Hon KYLE MCGINN: Is he ready? Free public transport is to be provided to school students and also for the entire community every Sunday. It is estimated that will save families with two children up to \$550 a year. That is fantastic.

Point of Order

Hon NEIL THOMSON: I have observed that the honourable member has been reading right throughout his speech.

Hon Kyle McGinn: My notes.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Steve Martin): Members, Hon Neil Thomson is raising a point of order. Can we have quiet while he does so, please. Thank you.

Hon Sandra Carr; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon Stephen Pratt; Hon Darren West; Hon Ayor Makur Chuot; Hon Klara Andric

Hon NEIL THOMSON: I have observed that the member has been reading his speech notes very closely. It sounds like a pre-prepared speech.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: There is no point of order; the member has been referring to his notes. Can I also urge members that this is not a discussion between members. Please refer your remarks through the chair.

Debate Resumed

Hon KYLE MCGINN: Acting President, thank you for your guidance. I get a bit excited sometimes, so I apologise. Look, it is easy to get excited about this because we have so much good news about the cost-of-living relief being delivered by the Cook Labor government in Western Australia. It is fantastic; it gets me buzzing! That relief included free public transport from Christmas Eve to January 2024 and our \$24.4 million WA rent relief program.

I have some notes on a list of things. It includes fee-free TAFE places, with the commonwealth government providing 22 200 fee-free places over 2024, 2025 and 2026. Another \$44.5 million will go to the TAFE sector. I am absolutely proud to be part of a government that backs in training. The good news continues with back-to-school payments for foster carers and grandcarers—\$3.6 million of relief. That is fantastic! That is more relief. KidSport vouchers have been doubled, from \$150 to \$300, for the next two years. That is absolutely fantastic! In total, the Cook Labor government has spent more than \$2.8 billion over the last five years to deliver cost-of-living support. That is fantastic! There is the seniors cost-of-living rebate. We know that our seniors are a group who can struggle. That rebate will increase in line with inflation over the next four years, with the 2023–24 rebate being boosted to \$104 for singles and \$156 for couples. We also have hardship utility grant scheme payments for those in financial hardship who require assistance to pay their utility bills. We will increase that payment by 10 per cent to \$640 for households and \$1 060 for households above the twenty-sixth parallel.

It is clear that the Cook Labor government is out there doing the hard work to find results and give cost-of-living relief to members of the Western Australia community for issues that we are seeing right across the world. The Cook Labor government is delivering good management of the finances, strong governance and actual policies that make sense. I am very proud to be a part of it.

HON STEPHEN PRATT (South Metropolitan) [11.57 am]: I will follow on from Hon Kyle McGinn and say that, yes, this is a really important issue. I thank Hon Sandra Carr for bringing this motion to the chamber today, because we are finally talking about something that is important to Western Australians across the state. Other issues were raised this week that did not do this sort of stuff justice. Hon Sandra Carr's motion is about an issue that is impacting people right across Western Australia. Tackling the cost of living is our number one priority, especially for WA families, who want to make sure that their kids receive the best education. As a parent, I know how challenging it can be to cover the extra costs associated with school. Thankfully, the Cook Labor government is doing something about it by introducing the WA student assistance payment for all WA school students. It will provide a direct payment of \$150 for each primary school or kindy student and \$250 for each secondary school student.

The important part of this is that there will be an application process. We need to make sure that we get this information out to people so that it is easily available and people have no issue accessing it. I think we have made it as easy as possible. To access the payment, parents will simply need their child's WA student number, which is something that I had not heard of before. It is an eight-digit number that can be found on school reports, including previous NAPLAN results. I think it is on some students' SmartRiders as well. If all else fails, I am sure the school will be able to assist parents to locate that number. Applications must be done through the ServiceWA app by Friday, 28 June 2024. These payments will be available for application on the app from the start of term 2, 15 April, which is a welcome start to that term for parents and families.

I had my speech notes set out in a certain order, but matters have been raised that I would like to touch on first. Hon Sandra Carr mentioned a few things that I also wanted to raise. There was an interjection about one of them, which I was surprised by. Hon Sandra Carr mentioned the Seniors Card and the reintroduction of the security rebate. That was followed by some interjections, which surprised me, given that the previous Liberal–National government scrapped that. That is shameful. I am glad this government was able to reintroduce the rebate.

Hon Kyle McGinn mentioned the very important hardship utility grant scheme. In my previous role, back in the day, as an electorate officer, I was able to guide people who were not necessarily aware of the scheme through the process of applying. Pretty much all the time, they were people who were doing it really tough. It is a welcome announcement that that amount will be increased by 10 per cent, because I know that it assists people who are doing it tough. It is a great scheme to remind people about.

The free TAFE courses were mentioned. We should go back a step and remind ourselves that, firstly, after the cost of the courses increased by several hundred per cent under the previous government, we slashed the cost of the courses and then made them free. We are working in partnership with the commonwealth government to provide those free courses. I have mentioned in this chamber before the importance of training and TAFEs. I have visited

Hon Sandra Carr; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon Stephen Pratt; Hon Darren West; Hon Ayor Makur Chuot; Hon Klara Andric

all the TAFE locations in South Metropolitan Region. It is a great opportunity for anyone looking to upskill or transition into a different source of employment. They can now access those free courses. It is done in a targeted way so that if there is a need for a workforce in a specific area, the courses are provided as an incentive to people to enter that field. Western Australia's economic strength relies on its skilled workforce. It is critical that every Western Australian has access to TAFE and vocational courses.

The government has also provided at least \$1 400 in household electricity credits to every household in WA in recent years. I know that people have felt the impact of that as it has been introduced in recent years. We have also provided, again in partnership with the commonwealth, funding for an extra \$1.6 billion in WA public school education—the first deal of its kind in Australia. I look forward to seeing the outcome of that huge investment.

As has been mentioned, the government launched free public transport during the school week for students with a SmartRider card and has introduced other public transport measures to assist with the cost of living. That includes capping public transport fees in Perth to two zones, the Fare Free Sundays initiative and free public transport over the summer holidays for SmartRider holders, which has been mentioned. That was a welcome announcement over the break. We also doubled the student travel allowance for regional families and capped regional airfares, making it more affordable across regional WA.

The KidSport initiative was also mentioned, which I am a huge fan of. The fact that we have doubled that cannot be welcomed enough. That initiative will have a real impact in an area for which I have strong support—that is, community sport. There should be no barrier to people accessing community sport. Everyone would agree that it would be good to do that little bit extra to help families with the costs associated with that. Doubling the vouchers from \$150 to \$300 is a great initiative. The program has also been opened up slightly, and that is smart. Fees are associated with joining a sporting club and also the required equipment that comes with that, and it can be a burden to access that. We do not want that to be the case. The vouchers can be used towards club fees, equipment or uniforms, and that will make community sport more affordable and accessible.

As my colleagues have said, the cost is endless. Relatively recently, the government provided free rapid antigen tests for people. That has been criticised by the opposition, which is ridiculous, because we were in a pandemic and we did not know when it would come to an end. Now that RATs are not as available, because they are not provided free, it costs about fifty bucks to buy five tests.

Hon Neil Thomson: They were expired!

Hon STEPHEN PRATT: That is what happens; they do expire.

Nowadays, if people want to do the right thing by the rest of the community and test, they have to buy the RATs from the chemist and it is about fifty bucks for five. For those who have five people in the household, they go pretty quickly if they do the right thing and test everyone—as hard as that is with little ones. That system worked. We were in a pandemic and tried to encourage people to do the right thing—to test and report the numbers so we knew what was going on in the community. That initiative was a great success.

As I mentioned, we reintroduced the Seniors Card and the security rebate program. We cannot do enough for seniors. It is a great initiative and it is welcomed by people who receive those benefits. I have mentioned the hardship utility grant scheme. It is important for people in the community who are doing it tough. Why is all this great stuff that the Cook government is doing possible? It is because the Cook Labor government has managed the finances of the state properly and secured our fair share of the GST. We can provide assistance to WA families when things are tough and invest in the infrastructure that matters to Western Australia. It is the right thing to do and people can rely on the Cook Labor government to always do what is right for WA.

HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [12.07 pm]: On behalf of the opposition, I rise to speak on this motion by Hon Sandra Carr. I am sure the \$250 will be welcome, given the tough times that people are facing. Sadly, those tough times are the result of both the federal Labor government and seven years of WA Labor. Members mentioned the targeting of the student assistance payment and where it is most important. However, what was missed out in the discussion was the timing of this target; nobody mentioned when. I have it on good authority that the government wanted to have the WA student assistance payment targeted for first term. Anyone with good logic would suggest that that is when it is needed. The money needed to be in the pockets of those parents in January, when they had to buy the books and organise themselves. What happened? My understanding is that they approached the Department of Education sometime after Christmas—who knows when the decision was made about this?—but it should have been dealt with last year. The government could not roll it out in time. In fact, it came up with the idea of an app. Now we have been told that parents have to download an app. We saw what happened—I am seeking protection from the chair—with the SmartRider Labor Party data harvesting scheme. We saw that in action. I hope the Auditor General will look very closely at the management of the data that is connected to this scheme, notwithstanding the importance of getting money into the pockets of every family. The problem is that people in

remote or regional Western Australia will not necessarily be able to download the app in time. The app will be available from 15 April to 28 June. People have to go online, get the app, download the information —

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order!

Point of Order

Hon DARREN WEST: The honourable member is deliberately misleading the house. The honourable member knows that the app is not the only way people can apply for the school assistance grants. There are alternative means. The member knows this and is wilfully and deliberately misleading the house.

Hon Peter Collier: He is not.

Hon DARREN WEST: He is so! Even he is not that stupid!

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Sandra Carr): Honourable member, I have considered the point that you have raised. There is no point of order.

Debate Resumed

Hon NEIL THOMSON: Thank you.

It will be interesting to see how this works. I encourage the Auditor General to keep a close eye on this, given the clear data harvesting actions that some members of Parliament were involved with regarding the SmartRider app, as was recently reported in *The West Australian*.

The ad hoc nature of the approach to cost-of-living relief for our communities is a worrying trend. The government needs to deal with the underlying issues, which are inflation and the massive increase of people coming into Western Australia, which has caused record levels of housing distress and increased rental prices. We have seen house rent increases, year on year, by 15 per cent, yet this government also has the worst number of dwelling completions in recent history. In the three years to June 2023, dwelling completions fell to 42 000, which is the lowest number on record over three years. These are the fundamental problems that this government is dealing with. Members opposite talk about the Minister for Housing and the great things he is doing, but, again, this government has the worst record on social housing. Over the term of this government, there has been a decline in social housing numbers. Those are the underlying challenges that our community faces. Instead, the government comes out with very poorly targeted and late relief for families. I encourage those families to apply for those grants and get as much as they can, because they are going to need it in this second term.

This government is all about spin and optics. This government treats the \$103 million as though it is its own money. Perhaps the delay was on purpose; I do not know. How close is the government trying to push this initiative to the next election so that government members of Parliament can all go out and start spruiking this app for themselves? That is the sort of approach that we see from this Labor government.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order! I remind honourable members that Hon Neil Thomson has the floor.

Hon NEIL THOMSON: Thank you, Acting President.

The underlying challenges need to be dealt with. One of the underlying challenges that we see is a massive increase in the median price of houses in Perth. We are not seeing targeted relief for first home owners. In the time I have left, I will identify a few of the challenges that we in Western Australia are facing. There is an interest rate increase of \$1 500 a month to the average mortgage in Western Australia. That massive increase is all part of the federal Labor government's mismanagement of the finances. More than 325 000 Western Australians, including 85 000 children, are living below the poverty line. This is the challenge that we should be focusing on. As I said, median house rental prices have increased by almost 16 per cent over the past 12 months.

Hunger relief charities have noticed a marked rise in the number of Western Australians experiencing food insecurity. This government does not care about the not-for-profit sector; it does not support the not-for-profit sector in the way that is needed. Foodbank highlighted that last year 388 000 households in WA were struggling to put food on the table and 250 000 households experienced severe food insecurity. This is a very serious issue in Western Australia. This is one of the richest jurisdictions in the world. If Western Australia were a country, we would be at the top of the table in terms of our GDP per person. OzHarvest, a WA food service provider, has seen a huge surge of people in need, with a 20 per cent increase in customers over the past 12 months. These are just some of the challenges we are facing.

Hon Sandra Carr; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon Stephen Pratt; Hon Darren West; Hon Ayor Makur Chuot; Hon Klara Andric

Here we have a poorly targeted relief system, which I am sure people will appreciate, but it is late. It should have been rolled out in early January so that parents getting their kids back to school could have done so without pressure. But we saw this government push it down the road, as close as it could to the election, and I am waiting to see all the other little benefits and hand-outs that will come, as though it is the government's money. It will roll that out to all those backbenchers who sit —

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order! Members, I am struggling to hear Hon Neil Thomson, despite his great voice projection.

Hon NEIL THOMSON: Thank you, Acting President.

All those backbenchers will be out there, spruiking the app and trying to collate as much data as they can so they can run their campaigns off the back of taxpayer dollars. That is what this government is all about. I encourage the Auditor General to look very closely at the management of this scheme. It is absolutely inexcusable in a state as wealthy as Western Australia. I stand by the comments of the Leader of the Liberal Party, Libby Mettam, in the other place, who is calling on the government to do something solid for the people of Western Australia, such as making structural change and making sure that those fees and charges do not escalate. I will add a comment to those representing the Treasury to next time come with an accurate table on the cost-of-living charges. I have raised it many times in this place, and I hope Treasury is listening because I will run a very close eye over that table.

HON AYOR MAKUR CHUOT (North Metropolitan) [12.17 pm]: I rise today to support Hon Sandra Carr's motion to recognise the Cook Labor government's announcement of the WA student assistance payment and other initiatives aimed at providing cost-of-living support to our people of Western Australia.

As a parent, it was interesting to listen to my parliamentary colleague Hon Neil Thomson going against this wonderful announcement. I can say that as a parent who works as a member of Parliament, I am better off than some of the families who are finding things really challenging and really tough. I think that what we should be hearing from the other side is support for this wonderful initiative, which will support families to reduce every little challenge. Anything that anyone can give to anyone who is struggling in this crisis that we are in—it is a world crisis, not a Western Australian crisis—is fantastic.

I was raised by a single mother, in between countries, and I know how hard it was for my mother at that time to provide for us. She would leave for 10 days and come back with food for us. As a young mother, when I had my first boy at age 17, I was a single mum for quite a long time. I know how tough it was for me. This is a wonderful initiative of the government that I sit on. I am really proud to say that we are doing our very best to support the people of Western Australia. This initiative will allow families to claim \$250 for each secondary school student and \$150 for each primary school and kindergarten student, as we heard earlier. As we heard from the other side, there are so many ways to access this support. One way is for the family to apply through the ServiceWA app with their child's student number. Applications will open from 15 April 2024 and close on 28 June 2024. Community members can contact their local members and information has already been shared at all the schools, so I am sure no-one will miss out on this wonderful initiative.

The Cook Labor government has also implemented several initiatives to address the challenges of the rising cost of living in Western Australia. These initiatives include a range of measures that aim to provide financial relief to families, individuals and businesses across our state. How fantastic is that? One of the most significant initiatives is the WA rent relief program that provides up to \$5 000 in direct rental support to tenants at risk. We have seen the struggle of our renters. They are really struggling. I am proud to be in this government that is able to do that for them.

The government has also introduced laws that ban rent bidding and limit rent increases to once every 12 months. I have seen constituents in my community with children kicked out of their houses. They have been homeless with their children. It is fantastic to be in a government that can observe the issues happening in the community and put these measures through for 12 months. I have already mentioned other measures that will help to ease the burdens of housing costs on families and individuals. The government has also added FuelWatch to the ServiceWA app, which will help commuters save money at the bowser they go to. Additionally, the government has scrapped the Liberal Party plans to privatise the energy system, protecting WA from skyrocketing increases in household power bills. That is fantastic. We have made it better. The government has also supported those who are doing it tough by offering free energy between 9.00 am and 3.00 pm to eligible Synergy households. That is another fantastic initiative.

As we heard from my parliamentary colleague before, the Cook Labor government has also distributed over 88 million rapid antigen tests to WA households, hospitals and community organisations, saving people hundreds of dollars. How fantastic is that? Before, we heard my parliamentary colleague, Hon Stephen Pratt, mention that five RATs cost \$50. That is really expensive in the cost-of-living situation we are in. The government has also

Hon Sandra Carr; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon Stephen Pratt; Hon Darren West; Hon Ayor Makur Chuot; Hon Klara Andric

delivered seven urgent care clinics across WA, providing free GP appointments for Medicare cardholders. That is fantastic. I have heard so much great feedback about that initiative. The government has reduced Keystart interest rates, saving customers thousands of dollars on interest payments. The government has also paid \$1 400 in electricity credits to every household in WA and provided a \$3000 cost-of-living payment in the 2023 budget to all the incredible public sector workers, including nurses, police and firefighters. How amazing is that? These were the frontline workers who did so much during COVID-19.

The Cook government also has also supported foster parents, grandparents and other carers with \$500 payments for a child in care and \$250 for each additional child in 2024. Additionally, the government has introduced the WA Seniors Card and security rebate, as we heard earlier, a program that was cut by the Liberal government previously. It is also increased the seniors cost-of-living rebate. The government has also continued to support the WA Seniors Card Discount Directory, helping seniors with the cost of living.

This is my favourite one. The government has also doubled the KidSport vouchers program, which will help families' and kids' engagement in sport. We do not want our children to sit at the keyboard. This wonderful initiative has allowed so many members of our community, those who are doing it hard, access for their children to play sport, be fit and engage themselves in the community. The government is also supporting up to 600 women in trade and technical obligations, with \$5 000 scholarships to increase pathways for women into higher paying jobs. Hear, hear! We are talking about equality. This is what we mean by a government that cares about everyone in our society.

The government has expanded the free heavy vehicle driver program into the Kimberley and Pilbara to train 350 participants. The government also provides cost-of-living assistance for regional nursing students who must travel to complete their mandatory practical placements. The government is doubling the travel and accommodation allowance for regional apprentices, trainees, cadets and interns who must travel long distances off the job for their training. The government has funded 150 more group training organisation wage subsidy places in 2024 to get more construction apprentices on the job. The government has also funded additional places under the renewed fee free TAFE partnership with the Albanese government across 130 priority courses in our state. In addition, the government has also capped public transport fees in Perth to two zones, as we heard earlier from our colleague, saving users thousands of dollars. There was also the recent announcement of students across Western Australia being able to catch the bus for free to get to school.

These initiatives demonstrate the Cook Labor government's commitment to providing cost-of-living support to the people of Western Australia. I thank Hon Sandra Carr for bringing this fantastic motion about our government's achievements to this Parliament. This government came to Parliament to represent the people of Western Australia, and I think that observing the everyday struggle of the people we represent and making their lives better is so important. I am proud to be in this government.

HON KLARA ANDRIC (South Metropolitan) [12.27 pm]: It gives me great pleasure to speak on the motion moved today by Hon Sandra Carr. I will do something that I have not done before and is probably not very common: I take this opportunity to thank Hon Neil Thomson for his contribution. He is my daily reminder of why I am proud to be part of this government and to be standing here today. Generally, Hon Neil Thomson just reminds me of why we do what we do and some of the failings of the opposition and the previous government.

The cost of living is very important and affects every Western Australian. It is something the Cook Labor government understands. We understand that the cost of living places significant financial pressure on Western Australians. On this side, we do a great job of talking to people about the cost of living. I know that in the last month or two I have made at least 200 phone calls to people in the South Metropolitan Region to talk about issues. This government and I know they are real. It has got to the point at which I recently visited a grocery store—that I will not name—with my nine-year-old who then proceeded to have a discussion with the lady at the till putting through our groceries. At the age of nine, they mentioned the cost of living as well. I know that what I am talking about in my household is getting through, to the point that my own children are talking about these issues as well. As I said, tackling the cost of living is our number one priority.

As a migrant who arrived in Western Australia all those years ago with two suitcases, I know that it was not easy for my parents to start with nothing. Although I do not ever recall struggling, I know that was probably more a result of my parents doing what they did, and what we all do as parents, to cover up some of the struggles going on in daily family life. It is something that parents do. I know that my parents certainly did that. We were certainly not exempt from feeling all sorts of cost-of-living pressures.

I was pleased to hear the exciting news about what is happening in the southern suburbs of the South Metropolitan Region, as mentioned by Hon Sandra Carr, with the delivery of further social housing. It is a fantastic initiative and an innovative concept. The new tiny homes will be in my very own local area of Spearwood. I take this

Extract from *Hansard*

[COUNCIL — Thursday, 21 March 2024]

p1210b-1219a

Hon Sandra Carr; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon Stephen Pratt; Hon Darren West; Hon Ayor
Makur Chuot; Hon Klara Andric

opportunity to thank the WA owned and operated company Summit Homes, and director David Leszenko and project manager Klara Relota, and, of course, Minister Carey.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.