

## WESTERN POWER — CONNECTIONS

### *Grievance*

**MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt)** [9.50 am]: My grievance is also to the Minister for Energy, and I thank him for taking the grievance. I rise today to grieve about the delays that a number of my constituents are experiencing with Western Power and new connections to the grid. I understand that the minister is well versed on this issue, having been asked a number of questions in the house previously and in responding to concerns raised by the opposition in various debates on the issue. I have listened with interest to the minister's answers and given that he has only the time allocated within question time to respond, I felt that a longer format for addressing these concerns may assist me, my constituents and others who have been impacted by these delays.

If I may, I would like to raise four issues in the electorate to illustrate the point, and seek the minister's feedback. Obviously, some of these issues may not be familiar to him today, and I am happy to take a response down the track if that is possible.

The Shire of Wyalkatchem is the first issue. The Shire of Wyalkatchem has received significant funding from the Minister for Water to upgrade its community dam to assist with stormwater capture and storage. It involved a pump installation and a chlorinator. This project was completed nearly eight months ago. For a time, the chlorinator was connected to an electric pump, which has since been removed. The shire is now managing a diesel pump, which uses about 200 litres a week at great expense to management and with not great outcomes for the environment. The shire has been told by Western Power that the project will not be connected until the end of June, if that is correct. That means that it will be 12 months since one government agency completed a project and another government agency has been unable to provide the connection. I cannot understand, when it is a government-to-government project, why there is not more discussion between the two organisations.

The second issue concerns a constituent from Cunderdin needing a connection to a new build for a home. On 31 March 2022, my constituent made their application to Western Power. There was a series of toing and froing. The application was lost. The payment was lost. Then, within Western Power, the person who had been assigned to the issue was reassigned, but the project was not reassigned to somebody within Western Power. My constituent has literally spent time on this from 31 March 2022 to 8 March 2023 and has then come to me after all that saying, "Can you please help? This is just beyond a joke." Western Power has confirmed that the design should be complete in mid to late March, which has obviously passed. Again, it has been over 12 months. There has been a whole raft of issues wherein the actual constituent has had to do all the following up with Western Power. There have obviously been some communication issues and continuity challenges within Western Power.

The third issue is the Tammin Golf Club. The president wrote to me on 30 January and said that he made an application to Western Power on 17 January. This is a new golf club. It is a great opportunity for the community. It does not have a lot of assets. It is where everyone comes together to manage the community, mental health, sport and all those things that are important in a small community town. The response from Western Power on 17 January states —

Your application is currently awaiting technical assessment from a Network Designer.

We are currently experiencing high volumes of work, as well as lengthy lead times for equipment delivery. Given this, we will touch base again week commencing 8<sup>th</sup> May 2023 and provide you with an update as to how things are progressing.

Once the technical assessment has been completed, we will then be able to provide an ETA for your design and construction.

Therefore, the golf club submitted its application in January. At that point, it received a response from Western Power saying that it will get back to them at the beginning of May, but that will not be when the design or application will be approved; that will be when the golf club will be told when to expect the approvals.

I find that remarkable, minister, and very frustrating for this community, which has put in a lot of effort to try to get this project up and running. The golf club is using all its own money and its staff were quite aggrieved that they would not be able to use that infrastructure for a long time.

The last issue is Bruce Rock Supermarket. I have stood in this place before and raised issues about funding for the Bruce Rock Supermarket. It is now out of the ground, the walls are up and the roof is on. It is getting there, but it has no power connection. The Bruce Rock Supermarket president wrote to me to say that he would really appreciate my assistance in trying to make sure that power is connected to the new Bruce Rock Supermarket. As the minister may be aware, it burnt down in 2020 and has been operating out of the town hall. The new supermarket should be completed by September 2023. The letter states —

Our engagement with Western Power commenced in September 2022 with an application for a connection of 230 Amps. Five months later, in February 2023, we received a connection offer of 110 Amps, which would be insufficient to power the supermarket equipment.

The supermarket needs 230 amps; the offer is for 110 amps, which is far less than what it actually needs, so it does not have an adequate allocation of power. Staff are also concerned that the time line will not be met and the community will be without a supermarket for another 12 months. This is not a good outcome for a small community where people are currently travelling and taking their business and all other requirements to the neighbouring town.

Firstly, I would really like an assurance from the minister. I have had some engagement with some of the contractors who deal regularly with Western Power. They have said that perhaps Western Power has been told to prioritise big government projects. Can the minister assure me that that is not the case? Secondly, is there some light at the end of the tunnel for these specific issues and the many more that have been raised by a number of members of Parliament on our side? I look forward to the minister's response.

**MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington — Minister for Energy)** [9.57 am]: I cannot comment on any specific case because I do not know the details, but I am happy to take those issues up. As I have done previously with people in the member's electorate, I am happy to visit them if we could find an opportunity to talk one on one.

There is no question that this is a frustrating and difficult problem. There certainly has been no instruction for Western Power to prioritise government projects. The problem is that Western Power normally receives about 3 000 applications a year, and, in the last year, it has received over 7 000 applications. The problem is that there is a 130 per cent increase in work. People might think that Western Power is just a government trading enterprise, but I make it clear that it is a commercial business. The fact is that there are more staff with Western Power now, in every aspect of the business, there are more workers in regional Western Australia in the south west interconnected system and there are more engineers and tradesmen with Western Power now than there was six years ago, and we continue to invest in staff. Unfortunately, when we have a 130 per cent increase in business, it is natural that some things take longer to clear that backlog, just like any other commercial business.

Western Power has engaged 10 additional full-time designers, including two who work exclusively on solar projects, so it is very important to bring them to market. Western Power has also put on eight new graduates in that area. Let us understand what needs to happen. A separate design needs to be done for each project. They have to be bespoke. There is no standard patent for any individual project. Of course, they are similar, and I am not saying that they are completely different each time, but they have to be done for that location. They have to be assessed for the network at that location and then they have to be finalised, again by engineers, before being implemented. The design has to be done in such detail as allows the construction of the project by the tradesperson on the site. Even what would be thought of as a simple project is, in fact, still quite complicated.

Again, I am not aware of the details of each of the projects that the member has raised in which a property has been burnt down and is now being renewed. It may well be that the customer wants a larger connection, which then leads to a range of challenges, one of which is that the capacity of the wire is the capacity of the wire. Therefore, if they are seeking a significant upgrade to the volume of electricity that they want, that can have a huge impact down the line for other customers. It may be that one of the challenges is the need to ensure that the design does not negatively impact on other people who use the same infrastructure. I make it clear that that is a challenge in the metropolitan area. In fact, it is a bigger challenge in the metropolitan area than it is in regional Western Australia because there is usually less excess capacity in the metropolitan area than there is in regional Western Australia, and Kwinana is the classic example of that.

We understand the challenges. The time frames are not acceptable and we are investing in the resources that we need, but this is a human resources challenge. Unfortunately for the clients of Western Power, Western Australia's economy is very strong and the skills that are being used by Western Power are exactly the same skills that are being used by our resources industry. Every day when we read in the newspaper about another resource project, we know that electrical infrastructure is included in those projects and the designers of those projects are the same technical people Western Power is seeking to employ. Unfortunately, the resources industry pays more than other sectors—the farming sector, as well as the government sector. It is a challenge finding the talent we need. Because Western Power is a big training provider under the current government, of course these industries also poach our staff, because we are doing the training that the private sector does not always do.

We have a series of problems here. I do not have a briefing note about the specific issues, but this is what Western Power has let me know. One of the challenges is land development. It has engaged with the land-developing lobby group the Urban Development Institute of Australia, and it is working through some procedures for engaging with land developers because it thinks that might assist. We are changing our contracting arrangements so that people have better visibility of the time lines that will be involved. We are also assisting with managing the supply chain. Again, we have had supply chain problems in not just electrical infrastructure, but also many industries. Tractors and cars are taking longer. A friend of mine told me that the car that they ordered 13 months ago is being

delivered next week. It is the same in the electrical industry. It is hard to get the components for electrical infrastructure and therefore the time lines are longer. Western Power has created a quality assurance team consisting of five senior distribution engineers, aimed at reducing wait times. It has outsourced overflow work to a panel of contractors. It has outsourced 46 packages of work for about 345 projects—just as an example, 7 000 is a large backlog. It is making sure that the land development team is protected from other internal demands. It is working through the triage process with applicants, particularly community applicants, to make sure that we do our best.