



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

(Reference: [COVID-19 pandemic response](#))

Members:

MR A COE (Chair)
MS T CHEYNE (Deputy Chair)
MRS V DUNNE
MS C LE COUTEUR
MR M PETTERSSON

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 28 MAY 2020

Secretary to the committee:
Mr H Finlay (Ph: 620 50129)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 12.02 pm.

RAMSAY, MR GORDON, Attorney-General, Minister for the Arts, Creative Industries and Cultural Events, Minister for Building Quality Improvement, Minister for Business and Regulatory Services and Minister for Seniors and Veterans

TYLER, MS SAM, Executive Branch Manager, artsACT

TRIFFITT, MR ROSS, Senior Director, EventsACT

THE CHAIR: Welcome. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for attending this online hearing today. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you all individually understand the implications of that statement?

Mr Ramsay: Yes, I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Tyler: I acknowledge the statement.

Mr Triffitt: I acknowledge the statement.

Mr Ramsay: I acknowledge for the record that my chief of staff is in the room, in the equivalent space of the public gallery, but not a witness for today.

THE CHAIR: Before we go to questions, minister, do you have an opening statement?

Mr Ramsay: Only a very brief one. The key issue for us is the questions and the information for the committee. Obviously, the impact of COVID-19 on the arts and the creative sector is systemic, systematic and significant. It is an impact that is not only deep but is also something that we acknowledge will take years for us to recover from, to where things were at the end of last year, which is why, from the ACT government's perspective, we have been working in a three-phase process: the initial phase of helping to sustain individuals and organisations on a day-to-day basis, moving through to a sustainability of organisations perspective, and now also moving into what life will be beyond COVID-19 once the pandemic is finally over, to ensure that our arts sector and our creative sector are in a strong position.

As we have seen, people throughout isolation have been turning to arts in a range of ways, often online in different ways, and I think that is because of the inherent value and importance of the arts to who we are as a community. The arts reflect who we are individually and collectively. The arts help us to reflect on what is happening in life and also help lift us for the future.

I believe that it is essential for us to have a strong arts and creative community, not only for the economy of Canberra but also, more importantly probably, for the wellbeing of the community as a whole. I am looking forward to being part of what I have been terming an arts-facilitated recovery alongside the rest of things. With that statement, I am very happy for us to go to questions and to have the conversation with the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, minister. With regard to the stages of the easing of restrictions, what significance is there for stages 2 and 3 as it relates to the arts?

Mr Ramsay: One of the key things is to make sure that as we rebuild we do so with the best health advice. So artsACT has been working with our health officials, as I have been working with the Minister for Health, to make sure that the easing of restrictions is primarily driven from a health perspective. That is the key thing.

As that then flows through, it is important for us to be able to work with our arts organisations, our creatives and our individual artists so that they are in a position to be able to step out of the restrictions in a way that is clear to them and makes sense to them and then, when it is safe from a health perspective, for those arts individuals and those arts organisations to recommence, to rebuild.

That is why we are doing the work, for example, with the RISE festival that I announced earlier this week, which is a way of helping to rebuild the arts' strength at the moment, while people are still in isolation and in physical distancing, then moving through to the Where You Are festival, which will run from July for two months, and then beyond that as well. What we have also been doing—

THE CHAIR: I am particularly asking about what stages 2.1 and 2.2 mean for the arts, particularly galleries, performing arts et cetera, and then stage 3. Technically what is going to be permissible?

Ms Tyler: For stage 2.1 there will be the reopening of galleries, museums and national institutions to groups of no more than 20 people, with physical distancing of one person per four square metres. There will be the reopening of dance classes for up to 20 students but within the four square metre rule; performance rehearsals for groups of up to 20 but within the four square metre rule; and classes and workshops in arts organisations for up to 20 people, again with the four square metre rule. Obviously, the general hygiene and physical distancing principles continue to apply. At this point, 2.1, there are still no performance activities taking place. But that will be considered for stage 2.2.

THE CHAIR: What does 2.2 mean and what is 3 likely to mean?

Mr Ramsay: Both 2.2 and 3 are still to be finalised by the health officials. That is the key issue on that. There is the ongoing opening up, on the proviso that it remains safe from a health perspective, to move into those at the intended times. Stage 2.2 means that we have the potential for performance, rather than rehearsal, and for events, and then the potential increase of size from 20 to 50, as is enabled from a health perspective.

THE CHAIR: I am particularly thinking about theatre companies and the like that would be rehearsing, practising and looking to put on a show. It is going to be very hard for them to make a theatre booking with the lack of certainty with the whole health situation. What are the options for stage 3? What are the best, medium and worst-case scenarios? Are theatres actually going to be allowed to have people sitting in them? Will they have to be in every second seat, every third seat, every third row? What are the options on the table?

Ms Tyler: Those options are still being considered with the Chief Health Officer. We cannot pre-empt those decisions being made by them. For stage 3, concerts, theatres, arenas, auditoriums or stadiums for rehearsals and small performances of fewer than 50 people will be considered, but the exact decisions on what that looks like from a seating perspective are still being worked through.

THE CHAIR: It is more than 50, is it not?

Ms Tyler: Yes, sorry.

THE CHAIR: It is that stage that I am curious about because it is looking like that is going to be life for the medium term, stage 3. Therefore, is it worth a theatre company preparing? Is it worth them getting the ball rolling for a show later this year? Is there a chance that they are going to be able to have a theatre that is half full or a third full?

Mr Ramsay: We can talk about chance but the key thing with the arts venues, the galleries and the theatres is that, as with other areas across Canberra, the implications of decisions will be because of decisions by the Chief Health Officer, not within the arts portfolio. The role of the arts portfolio is to work with the Chief Health Officer and then be able to translate the implications of that for both the public and the arts organisations themselves.

What 2.1 has done is enable rehearsals to recommence. The intent of 2.2 is that it moves to performances with smaller groups. And in stage 3 there is the potential to have audiences of a larger size. We will continue to work with the arts venues, with the theatres—with the CTC, with Street and with the great amateur performing companies that we have across Canberra—so that they are aware as the decisions are made in the health space rather than in the arts space.

MS LE COUTEUR: My question is specifically around choirs. There are many choirs that have more than 20 choir members. Will they have to wait until stage 3 before they can even rehearse?

Mr Ramsay: First, again, with choirs and with other organisations, questions on the limitations that are placed in terms of health restrictions are best directed to the health portfolio because they come under the legal area of the public health declarations. However, the restriction still, as has been determined by the Chief Health Officer, as I am advised, is that the groups, at this stage, are up to 20.

We are also aware, as are choirs around Canberra and beyond—and as are, for that matter, some forms of orchestras that involve wind through either brass or woodwind—that there are health risks around the vocalisation, so to speak. Certainly that is something that I understand the Chief Health Officer is very aware of. I have personally spoken to the Chief Health Officer on that. I understand that that is a live conversation at a national level as well.

The health restriction at this stage is that the groups are a maximum of 20. So if the choir is larger than 20, it cannot currently have all of its members together. Nor, for that matter, can a brass band or a wind orchestra or whatever it may be—not in

stage 2.1.

MS CHEYNE: My question is about the Homefront grants for individual artists. That was a very generous package and appears to have been very well received across the community. Given the popularity of the funding and the sheer number of applications, which I understand was close to 400, what were the criteria for choosing the successful applicants? I saw that the way to apply was quite straightforward; it was not overly burdensome, which was very good to see. But I am very curious as to what criteria were applied that resulted in those who were successful being successful.

Mr Ramsay: I am happy to start the conversation and then hand it over to Ms Tyler for some of the details. You are right. Homefront was one of the very first announced programs, right across Australia, in the area. We knew that it was important to act very quickly as part of the first stage of the support for our creatives. It was very well received. It is not the only way that funding is being made available. We can talk through some of the other ones, including the regular arts activity funding rounds. But Homefront was just under \$500,000 of new, additional money. It was not repurposed or redirected money; it was new money into the arts. You are right, Ms Cheyne, that it was very important to have a simple, quick process that also met the necessary and rightful elements of transparency of decision-making. I will hand over to Ms Tyler for the way that those decisions were made.

Ms Tyler: The criteria that we used were similar to what we use for our other arts activities' funding applications. It was around applicants being able to demonstrate arts development activities, which is new and exciting ideas or developing skills and practices; arts participation and access, which is around engaging in skills development in inclusive, accessible arts practices; or arts opportunities, which is around reaching new audiences and markets, connecting through residencies—clearly not so much residencies at the moment—or with national organisations, maybe online, and showcasing work. Those criteria that we use through all of our processes were the ones we used for this assessment process. We assessed them internally with artsACT. We had six of the artsACT team doing that assessment process, so there was a moderation process for the applications. Whilst it was a very fast assessment process, it was a very clear process that was followed to ensure that the applications were being assessed in the same way across the team.

MS CHEYNE: Did those who were unsuccessful—which was a considerable number, given that it was so popular—get individual feedback about their applications and how to improve for future funding rounds?

Ms Tyler: Yes, that is always offered through artsACT funding. Any applicants that were not successful were able to book in a session with an artsACT team member to receive feedback on their application. We do that with all of our rounds of funding. It is not always taken up by all of the unsuccessful applicants, but there were a lot of one-on-one conversations that happened around unsuccessful applicants. There was a lot of encouragement for those unsuccessful applicants to apply for other rounds of funding: up to \$5,000 for arts activities funding, which is open all year round, as well as the next round of \$5,000 to \$50,000 of arts activities funding, which opens on 1 June.

MS CHEYNE: I saw some commentary when the announcement was made in the *Canberra Times* that the funding had been awarded, I think on the Sunday. I saw on social media that some artists had said that this was the first that they had heard of it, which took me a little by surprise because I thought it had been quite widely advertised. Are you able to confirm where it was advertised and the effort that was taken to ensure that as many people knew about it as possible?

Ms Tyler: It is an interesting one because there was a higher percentage of first-time applicants to artsACT for Homefront. What that demonstrated to us is that the advertising for Homefront went beyond our normal networks for our arts activities funding. We advertised it through our newsletter. There were articles that were associated with the media releases through the Canberra Artists Action Group. The Minister's Creative Council was made aware. So that kind of opportunity to send it out through our social media and those other networks was taken up.

Mr Ramsay: And I did note, Ms Cheyne, that with the social media push that was one of the important channels, there was a lot of resharing from organisation to organisation. Organisations such as the Canberra Symphony Orchestra and others were sharing it and encouraging other people to apply as well. So there were both the formal forms of communication and the networks of communication. That is probably, as Ms Tyler has mentioned, represented in the very significant number of applicants that put in an application for it.

MR PETTERSSON: Have any pieces of work emerged from the program yet?

Ms Tyler: Not necessarily. It is kind of a tricky one because a lot of artists are using the funding to develop their practice. It was not necessarily for the production of new pieces of work in a way that that would be demonstrated through releasing them or being relevant for sale and those kinds of things. But I think that, over the next six to nine months and even into next year, we will start to see what the outcomes of that money have been.

Mr Ramsay: I have had a number of the successful applicants drop me a note saying thank you, and a number of them have also said, "When the CD comes out, we'll pass a copy on." So there is certainly work that is going on. I have mentioned in public before that when Shakespeare was in isolation, in quarantine because of the plague, we ended up with *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, among some others. So my hope is that we will have some great product that is coming out. Whether we get a *King Lear* or a *Macbeth* I am not sure, but I am sure that we will have some excellent products that will be coming through as part of this, as well as the general development of people's artistic practice.

MS LE COUTEUR: Minister, how are you monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on arts organisations and practitioners?

Mr Ramsay: Again, I will let Ms Tyler talk to this, but there is a regular videoconference of artists and arts organisations. It started off weekly; I believe that it is moving to fortnightly at the moment. ArtsACT is involved in that conversation each time. My office is involved in that conversation each time. I have been involved in that conversation personally as well. It is an important one for us to be able to hear

from the arts organisations. My understanding from the witness list that you have today is that the Canberra Artists Action Group is appearing before you. I think that will be an important one from their perspective as well. With that action group and the key arts organisations and others there has been very strong communication. Ms Tyler, do you want to mention some of the things that have come out of that?

Ms Tyler: Yes. The arts organisations forum that we have been hosting quite regularly is an opportunity for those organisations that we fund to tell us what is going on for them, what the impacts have been. Those conversations have led to the development of the support to organisations that was released a few weeks ago, which is up to \$1 million for organisational support. That regular contact that we have had with organisations is really informing the way we have been supporting them through this process and understanding the impact.

We also allocated an artsACT staff member to each organisation so that they have their key point of contact to make it easier for them to check in with artsACT, so that they know who to talk to and that there is some consistency there. ArtsACT has also been attending the Canberra Artists Action Group weekly meetings to ensure that there is a conduit for information from artists to come directly to us. And through the Minister's Creative Council there has also been an opportunity for us to have quite detailed conversations with arts practitioners about the impact of COVID on the arts. The Minister's Creative Council have a survey that they put out last week which is for artists and arts organisations to report on the impacts, which measures have been supportive and where there are gaps.

MS LE COUTEUR: In talking to the arts organisations, what are the main issues that they have been raising?

Ms Tyler: As with a lot of businesses and other industries, the uncertainty around when things will ease and what they can and cannot do has been one of the things that have come up. One of the other key issues is around the support they can get from the federal government through JobKeeper. There have been lots of conversations about eligibility for JobKeeper, and sharing of information about charitable organisations and the thresholds that they need to meet. There has been that kind of sharing of information. That is one of the key issues.

There has also been a lot of sharing of information around things like where to get information on the social distancing measures, cleaning—conversations about the Safe Work Australia information that is available—and things like cashflow, and conversations about keeping staff employed and the type of programs so that they can continue to do that. So the conversations have been quite broad in the topics that they have covered. We have also been covering things like where organisations had anticipated programs would take place that cannot take place because of restrictions, how the organisation can repurpose that funding and move into different things and make sure that their organisation is viable when we come out of all this.

Mr Ramsay: One of the great assets we have here in the ACT in the creative sector is that it is a very well connected community of people. In some spaces around Australia there is a very clear distinction between the amateur and hobby artists and creatives and the professionals. I think what we have here in the ACT is a much more

connected spectrum of people right across that, and therefore the communication has probably been easier here in the ACT than it has been in a number of jurisdictions—drawing together. It is partly the nature of our city and its size. It is also partly the way that our arts and creative sector has grown and evolved over previous decades. That has been a very helpful thing to be able to hear back—and therefore for people to be able to share their experiences, share their frustrations and also share their solutions to their frustrations.

MS LE COUTEUR: It sounds like the main thing you are hearing is about what is happening for the organisation itself. Is there any concern about the long-term impact on the rest of the community—their audiences, basically? Are they thinking that audiences may move to something else or we will spend our life on YouTube, or what?

Mr Ramsay: God forbid.

Ms Tyler: There has been some of that conversation. As the minister pointed out earlier, we have really been focusing on immediate support and stabilisation. But organisations are definitely starting to think about the audiences and when they will be ready to come back. I think there is a difference between when restrictions might have eased and when people actually are ready to go and sit in a theatre again or go to a live music venue. There has certainly been some research that the Australia Council has commissioned around audiences and what they are looking for when coming out of the restrictions. When that is published it will provide some useful insight into what audiences are expecting.

There has definitely been conversation at the Canberra Artists Action Group and through arts organisations around the changed expectations that people have as well. The different streaming mechanisms are offering different things for different types of art forms. There are some that have been more interactive and others that are very passive. There might be changed expectations around what audiences get when they go to see something live. There is always concern for organisations around audiences, and I think that that conversation will continue.

Mr Ramsay: That is one of the reasons why RISE Canberra is so important—which, as I said, we launched earlier this week. RISE Canberra has a number of things in it. As a website it has a calendar of events that are happening right now, which is helping to not only sustain and develop the arts practices of the artists but also keep the current and the future audiences engaged with our local artists. It helps people stay connected and keeps whetting the appetite, so to speak, whether it is for interactive entertainment, creative work or live music from someone's lounge room. So a range of things are happening there.

The next stage of that is the Where You Are festival, which will go from July for a couple of months, so that as the physical distancing limitations lift there is a way for us to have the festival looking quite different but, again, re-engaging with the local community and communities around Canberra so that the value of the arts is enhanced and not diminished out of this.

We acknowledge that it is going to be quite some time in the rebuilding before we get

back to where we were. I think it is really important that our arts are integral to that rebuilding. As you have heard me say before, the arts are fundamentally important to our community wellbeing, as well as our individual mental health. The capturing and reflecting of the soul that happens with our creatives is important for us to make sure that people stay well engaged. And I think people are well engaged at the moment. I follow Yo-Yo Ma now live on Facebook, and he puts out a cello solo every couple of days to help people through. He is pretty impressive, but I think a range of people are being driven to the arts in a range of ways. RISE Canberra and Where You Are help people continue to engage and build that engagement for the future so that, as numbers become 20, 50, 100 or beyond, our audiences are ready and willing to engage again.

Ms Tyler: On the research that I was talking about, there is a snapshot available on the Australia Council for the Arts website. The research was done by Patternmakers and WolfBrown. It measures changes in behaviour and the sentiments of art goers in the wake of COVID-19. Some of the key findings from there were that, overwhelmingly, audiences plan to return to arts and cultural events in the future, with 85 per cent planning to attend just as they did in the past; and that, on average, 22 per cent of audiences are comfortable attending as soon as restrictions are lifted, while 67 per cent will attend when they deem the risk of transmissions to be minimal. A whole bunch of statistics from that survey are available on the Australia Council for the Arts website now.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, I would like to go to the million-dollar funding that was announced for key arts organisations and program-funded organisations. I understand that the applications for that round of funding closed recently, in the last week or so. What was the take-up like? Was it as you anticipated? When will the decision be made about funding, and when will it flow to the organisations?

Mr Ramsay: That is still a process in train. We will be able to speak about the numbers of take-ups and the decision on the other side of that. I think it has been an important one. I will, again, allow Ms Tyler to talk through the processes of the decision-making itself. The intention is for that funding to be available to arts organisations very quickly because the reality is that the reason the government made the decision to allocate that additional up to \$1 million for those key arts and program-funded organisations was that COVID was hitting a number of organisations significantly. It placed a number of organisations at risk both financially and, I think as importantly, creatively. It was a matter of making sure that this second step of our funding support happened very quickly. Ms Tyler, do you want to outline the details of the process?

Ms Tyler: Currently we are assessing the information that was provided by organisations. That information included revised budgets, information about federal government assistance that they had been able to apply for or receive, information on organisational financial reserves and how they get accessed, and what their request was. We have been working within artsACT to review all that documentation, along with the information we already have from those organisations for the budgets that they have submitted for the 2020 calendar year and the acquittals that are coming in for the last calendar year—because these organisations work on a calendar year basis. We are also working with Treasury to work through the assessment process, to

understand the impacts. The aim is to have the funding to the organisations this financial year, so before the end of June.

MRS DUNNE: Could I follow up on a particular instance? It relates to Kulture Break. How is it that Kulture Break were invited to apply for this funding when they were not eligible?

Mr Ramsay: That was an administrative error. The phone call that, I understand, occurred at 4.45 in the afternoon and was corrected by 5.30 that afternoon was a mistake.

MRS DUNNE: It certainly was.

Mr Ramsay: An apology was offered in that 5.30 phone call as well. Kulture Break, as you are aware, Mrs Dunne, is neither a key arts organisation nor a program-funded organisation. It does receive budget funding through the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate on a budget basis, through a social inclusion grant. My understanding is that it has been invited to speak with that directorate to make a case equivalent to that form of support. We understand that there had been no communication from Kulture Break prior to that date that there was financial difficulty around the organisation. But I understand that CMTEDD is now working with Kulture Break on a potential application for funding from outside this particular portfolio.

MRS DUNNE: When were those two phone calls made?

Ms Tyler: They were made on Thursday, 14 May, in the late afternoon.

MRS DUNNE: So soon after, on the same afternoon that you briefed my office on arts funding and who was involved and gave us a list of who was involved in that million dollars, you made a phone call to someone who was not on that list?

Ms Tyler: Yes. As the minister outlined, it was a mistake in the list that was being worked off.

MRS DUNNE: The list that you gave me at the time did not have that mistake in it, so I am a little perplexed as to why in these circumstances you managed to raise someone's expectations and dash them in quite such rapid succession.

MS CHEYNE: I want to get an expansion on what you were saying about how Kulture Break will be funded. I think you said that it will be through CMTEDD and perhaps a grant process that way. Is there any more detail you can give about that? I am very aware that we do not have a budget this year, so some organisations that would usually be keeping an eye out over the next few weeks probably have some questions. I am curious as to what that means for Kulture Break and how their funding will be able to continue so that they can continue to do their good work.

Mr Ramsay: It is beyond my authority as minister for the arts to say how they will be funded because, obviously, any decision on that sits outside the arts portfolio. However, I can say that there have been conversations, as I understand, already

between Kulture Break and the Chief Minister's office and that the process is being linked with the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate in the social inclusion area, which is where the funding for Kulture Break comes from within the budget itself. Kulture Break receives approximately \$100,000 per year under the ACT budget, in the social inclusion area rather than in the arts area. Therefore, it is not my space to say exactly how funding will flow to them. That is not a decision that I will be making. I do know that they have been connected both with the Chief Minister's office and with the directorate. I understand that, in addition to that, they have been funded through the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund as part of the initial COVID response.

Ms Tyler: That funding through the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund, which is on the website, is for \$8,000. That came through Hands Across Canberra, through the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund.

MR PETTERSSON: We have seen Sydney's Carriageworks going into voluntary administration. Do you have any concerns about any ACT arts providers or facilities that are not key arts programs currently funded through this \$1 million potentially experiencing the same financial stress and potentially going the same way as Carriageworks?

Mr Ramsay: The million dollars for the key arts organisations and the program-funded organisations—it is not accurate to say it was a response to the Carriageworks situation but we were certainly mindful of the Carriageworks situation, as that was being considered here. The dynamics around organisations here in the ACT are probably different from the size, scale and nature of organisations in Sydney. Carriageworks is effectively a largely commercially driven organisation through the leasing of spaces to arts organisations. We do not have an equivalent of that here.

What we do have are arts organisations such as Ainslie and Gorman, Belconnen Arts and other organisations that have a range of artists and creatives who rent their space. That is why in the first part of our second stage of support there were rental waivers. There were not only rental waivers for head lessees who were renting property from the government but also \$500,000 provided to head lessees so that they could, in turn, waive rental from the arts individuals and creatives who are using their space. Our equivalents of Carriageworks are more likely to be in our key arts organisations. That is why both the rental waiver and that million dollars of additional funding were so important to ensure the sustainability of those organisations.

THE CHAIR: Minister, on the Kulture Break issue, obviously I am pleased that a very worthy organisation is being considered for support elsewhere. There are also other groups that are not dissimilar to Kulture Break in terms of the support they provide their community. Are they also going to be afforded the same support opportunities that Kulture Break is now going to receive?

Mr Ramsay: Again, given that they sit outside the arts portfolio, it is probably not appropriate for me to say what opportunities are being provided to organisations outside my portfolio. What I can say is that my office and I have not been contacted by other equivalent organisations. As you say, there are a range of excellent organisations that are providing very important support in a range of ways that sit

outside the key arts and the program-funded organisations. There is, of course, still the ongoing funding that is available through the arts activity fund, both the under \$5,000, and the \$5,000 to \$50,000 grant rounds for that. They can be available as well. So, too, the Where You Are festival has \$240,000 of funding that is available as of now. So within the arts portfolio there are a range of ways for things that sit outside the arts portfolio. They may be making contact with other directorates and other agencies across government, but it would not be appropriate for me to speculate on that.

THE CHAIR: Did you or did anyone from artsACT contact the Chief Minister's directorate about Kulture Break?

Mr Ramsay: My office was in contact with the Chief Minister's office around Kulture Break as soon as we became aware of any issues in relation to Kulture Break. We were speaking with them within hours.

THE CHAIR: What were you telling the Chief Minister's office?

Mr Ramsay: That there had been an administrative error, a phone call that was made and a phone call that was an apology to correct that. My understanding—if I am wrong on this I will correct the record for you—is that the Chief Minister's office was in direct contact with Kulture Break again as a matter of absolute urgency.

THE CHAIR: I think everyone appreciates that courtesy. However, if it is not your role to consider funding for anything outside the arts space, why would you advocate for them to get support elsewhere and not for any other organisation to receive support?

Mr Ramsay: As a result of the administrative error, Kulture Break indicated that they had some financial difficulties. No other organisation has been contacting us indicating any financial difficulties in that space.

THE CHAIR: So other organisations that are in financial difficulties in a similar space will get treated the same way and be afforded the same advocacy?

Mr Ramsay: If organisations that involve the arts and are not arts-funded organisations were to contact my office or artsACT and express concern around their financial sustainability or their financial viability, I can assure you and assure them that we would connect them with the appropriate part of government.

THE CHAIR: Have you done that for the CAT Awards?

Mr Ramsay: We have not been contacted by the CAT Awards in relation to COVID, to my knowledge.

THE CHAIR: But you have been contacted by them on other occasions?

Mr Ramsay: Yes, on other occasions that are not COVID related. They have not applied for arts activity funding for some time; that is my understanding. When they have made a request for some financial support, we have connected them with the

Chief Minister's directorate and the Chief Minister's office because the particular activity that they were seeking some assistance with, which was an event in relation to their awards night, fell outside anything in the arts funding area. We connected them with the Chief Minister's office and the Chief Minister's directorate as soon as they made contact with us. To be clear, that is quite independent of COVID. That was well before COVID hit. We made that contact on their behalf with the Chief Minister's office when that request was made.

THE CHAIR: Back to Kulture Break, if they were not receiving arts funding, how did they get a call? Where did the name come up from? If they are not on your list, if they are not in your remit, why did they get a call and not an infinite number of other organisations that are not within the remit?

Ms Tyler: ArtsACT was working off a list which had allocated staff members to organisations to be a key point of contact. Kulture Break have previously received funding from artsACT, so they were on a list of organisations that have received support from artsACT. The list of organisations that were eligible to apply for this funding and the list of organisations that artsACT has had an ongoing relationship with over a number of years were conflated. That is how the mistake was made.

MR PETTERSSON: One of the phrases that you have used a couple of times, Mr Ramsay, is “arts-facilitated recovery”. Could you expand on what that will look like?

Mr Ramsay: I could speak for a lot longer than seven minutes on this one. It comes back to the principle of how important arts are for us as a community. The reason for that is that every single person is creative, so as we engage with the arts it deepens who we are as human beings and, therefore, the quality of life that we live.

Arts also help bring us together in some ways. There is no such thing, in my view, as a piece of art that is simply for the sake of the artist. Every piece of art engages with other people. Art also has the capacity for us to reflect on where life is. Probably a good example of that is some of the work that has happened in war situations, where either art itself or photography—key-placed photographers embedded with some of the troops—have had the chance to help reflect on what is going on for us and, therefore, what we learn as a community out of that. That is what I am talking about as an arts-facilitated recovery, alongside any of the economic benefits, leaving aside the fact that the arts are one of the great economic drivers for our community and our economy as well.

There is a project happening at the moment that is being led through Tuggeranong Arts Centre where a photographer and an arts practitioner are moving through and taking photos of what is happening in the health space, documenting what is happening, how people who are the first-line responders are dealing with the situation and how members of the general public are reflecting on what is happening. We will then, even just out of that project, have something that helps us look back at what will be a generationally defining period of time, not dissimilar from what happened with the bushfires and the bushfire memorial. That is a static but important way for us as a community to be able to engage with and reflect through.

What our arts do here is help build our sense of identity. They build our understanding and our engagement with life and then they also help lift the resilience of the community, which has had a threefold or fourfold battering this year. Between smoke and fire and hail, we did not have the sense of refreshment over summer that we normally would. We then went from there into the ongoing COVID pandemic. What the arts can help to do is rebuild our sense of community resilience, as well as having people engaging in the economy of the arts through the financial support of our artists and our creatives.

MRS DUNNE: Looking at the RISE Canberra webpage, this is something that the arts community has been calling for in some form or other for a very long time and has been missing since the departure of Canberra Arts Marketing. Why did it take the COVID pandemic to put together something like this, which the community has been asking for for so long?

Mr Ramsay: What we find with any emergency, any significant impact on the community, is that it gives us the opportunity to reflect on what exists, how we can continue to improve and how we can take opportunities. We have done that with RISE. I believe that this website—the calendar, the news—is capitalising on a significant number of things that are happening across the arts community at the moment. There are always a range of views as to what should be happening at any particular time. I am pleased that this initiative that is happening now, RISE, will put us in very good stead and will be an ongoing legacy of this time.

MRS DUNNE: So you see it as not just for this time; it will be an ongoing legacy? To what extent will its ongoing development and sustaining be consulted on with the community? To what extent will it be bottom up rather than top down?

Mr Triffitt: In the development of the site, there has been a lot of consultation across arts organisations and facilitated through artsACT as well. The RISE Canberra website has effectively come from one of the challenges with the EventsACT website, which is that it curates information through the Tourism Australia data warehouse. This provides a more flexible method of communicating events that are going on in Canberra either in a virtual environment or in a physical environment. The intent is that this website will continue beyond the pandemic. We will certainly engage in further consultation with organisations to improve on this immediate measure coming out of COVID.

MRS DUNNE: Great. Because I was late in, this may have been covered: what is your thinking, minister, about what a plan for restarting the arts community will look like, apart from the festival and the webpage? What is there as we get to 50, 100 or more people?

Mr Ramsay: We did cover a number of those before.

MRS DUNNE: I do apologise.

Mr Ramsay: In very brief summary, obviously the key driver of the steps will be the health directions. We will continue—

MRS DUNNE: I am asking you what your vision is.

Mr Ramsay: In terms of the vision for our arts, I talked about, as I did with Mr Pettersson, an arts-facilitated recovery. I think that is how we engage the broad community and help build the resilience of this community through this. That has an additional power in the arts itself.

The other thing we have at the moment is that our artists and our creatives are developing their practice in this time. The important thing for us at the moment is then to be able to build on how they are developing their practice. We will have significant learnings as a sector and as a community coming out of this time when our artists, our latent choirs and our non-rehearsing theatre groups have been developing their practice for the future.

What we will clearly have is a staged recovery. I think I mentioned right at the very beginning the Deloitte business analysis that says that the arts sector is one of the two sectors hardest hit by COVID and that it will have an over 50 per cent impact and is likely to take potentially five years to fully recover. What I want to do is make sure that we have the space to build step by step for an ongoing recovery through our artists and also through an increased engagement with our community. Here in Canberra we have, as you are very aware, a very high engagement of the general community with theatre productions, with music productions, with live arts, with live performances. That is something that I believe we can build on. I think some of the research that is going on with the Australia Council at the moment will inform where we can go from here with that.

THE CHAIR: We will leave it there. Minister, thanks very much to you and your officials. You will get a copy of the transcript. Please double-check to make sure that it is accurate. If there is any further information that would assist the committee, please provide it. We will ensure that it is published on the committee website.

Hearing suspended from 1.03 to 1.21 pm.

PLEVEY, MISS ALISON, Member, Childers Group
DYSON, MS JULIE AM, Member, Childers Group

THE CHAIR: Welcome. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you each understand the implications of that statement?

Miss Plevey: Yes.

Ms Dyson: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Before we go to questions, do you have an opening statement that you would like to give?

Miss Plevey: Yes, thank you. Thanks for reaching out to the arts community this week to hear our experiences in this unprecedented time. I speak today as a member of the Childers Group, the independent arts advocacy body here in the ACT, and as a dancer, artist, performer, choreographer and company director of Australian Dance Party, teacher and youth dance practitioner here in the ACT—so really active in dance and performing arts. The key points I really want to highlight today with you are the positive and negative impacts that we have experienced in dance, which also cross over into theatre, circus and other performing arts in professional, commercial and community spheres during the pandemic.

First, economically, small organisations like my organisation, Australian Dance Party, and dance businesses like dance studios et cetera have been extremely vulnerable, because obviously we are a high-risk activity. The risk of contracting the virus is very high here and we have not been able to engage with audiences, engage with students or even gather to do a rehearsal. It is not possible. So the core of our work, has been severely affected. We have not necessarily been able, then, to receive the income from performances and creative developments and to get those going. Also, workshops and classes with students have been severely impacted, although a lot of this has shifted online. We have been able to adapt to a certain extent, but it is really not the same activity and connection, and the community social aspect of the arts, dance and theatre et cetera is not really being felt. Those have been the major impacts: economically not being able to do, necessarily, and earn; and also the social and mental health impacts for those people who usually engage in that activity.

Australian Dance Party are lucky this year that we are supported by the ACT government, with program funding, but there are other vulnerable organisations that are not so solid in their support from government or from other spheres. Some of them have been able to access JobKeeper and the like, but many have fallen through the cracks, which Julie will speak to a little more. So, economically, it has been very up and down and bits and bobs for artists, very confusing for artists.

I know that the ACT government has gone a long way to try to provide clearer information for artists, which we really appreciate, especially on how, coming out of COVID, artists and arts and cultural activity can start to recommence. We really appreciate that specific information, because of the diversity of the activity we do in

performing arts and it obviously being really high risk. So any continued information that you can provide to our sector is most welcome, especially with the dance studios, dance schools et cetera. That has been quite a confusing aspect.

Ms Dyson: I support what Alison is saying, especially for the small businesses—arts organisations run as small businesses. The physical art forms like drama and dance and, to some extent, music and choirs are all heavily impacted by this, and their ability to come out of it without support is going to be very shaky. From an arts sector point of view, we very strongly want to be part of the solution, not part of the handout mentality where we are needy and we need more and more money. We are actually the solution to this. We feel very strongly that we can provide as much as possible for mental health issues, Dance for Parkinson's and all those community-based arts activities, as well as the higher profile companies and organisations.

The studio sector is really badly impacted. I spent the morning on the phone with very distressed business owners. A survey we did briefly in New South Wales showed that 52 per cent of independent artists were not eligible for JobKeeper or JobSeeker. That is a huge percentage that we really need to address in coming to terms with the recovery process. I think that, often, state and federal arts funding bodies are not able to respond with the capacity they need to support those organisations. That is another issue for all of us: whether, despite the generosity of states and territories, particularly the ACT government, there really is going to be the capacity to respond in the way we need that support. I will leave it there so that you can ask questions.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you for your time today and your insights. You did say at the beginning that in your situation you saw pluses and minuses. There is clearly a real problem for many people who are small business people in the arts sector: teachers, people who run dance studios, music teachers and the like. Ms Dyson has touched on the need for financial assistance in that space. But how do you see the positives? What are the positives that these organisations and these sectors can draw on as we are emerging from this?

Miss Plevy: There has been a lot of shifting of classes online and an accessibility of classes and services that may not have been available and possible for certain members of the community before. So we see it as really positive that this pandemic has revealed an opportunity for our services, as artists and teachers within the community, to reach more people through these online realms. But, in a sense, the real joy and the experience of being involved in a dance class is lost as well through these virtual mechanisms. There have been students dropping off and we have seen students leaving.

I work at QL2 Dance, the elite contemporary dance youth ensemble. Some of those young artists are aspiring to dance careers, so there is loss of momentum for them and loss of technique and training. When you are dancing in two square metres in your lounge room, it is a really difficult thing to try to keep aspiring to the career that you are working towards, without those people around you, without having that contact. So there are positives and negatives, with people dropping away but also new accessibility for others to experience dance and performing arts more broadly through this time. It is a bit of a balancing thing there.

Ms Dyson: I think it has also brought the arts community together in a way that is almost unprecedented. That is a positive. We are all talking much more to each other. I think we are all very much more understanding of the different sectors, the way we want to work. From an Ausdance point of view, because I am an Ausdance national person as well, we have produced national guidelines for returning to dance at the end of this and they have been widely well received. They were released yesterday. It is all about how to return. So we are supporting businesses with guidelines to help them return safely and as quickly as possible, given that each jurisdiction has different rules for stage 2. That is another little battle for us. But the bringing together of the different arts sectors has been a very big positive.

Miss Plevey: Yes. Also, something more generally within the ACT is that artsACT has been much more active, with discussions on a fortnightly basis between arts organisations. The support and the conversations and engagement that are happening there are brilliant. If we could continue that, coming forward, going out of COVID, I think it would be incredible. Similarly, our independent artists sector have come together through the CAAG, which I know you are meeting with as well. This incredible sense of uniting and finding solutions and support and finding a way through is, if we can find a way to continue this into the future and strengthen our arts ecology in an ongoing way, a fantastic outcome.

MS CHEYNE: It is really lovely to hear—and I am not surprised—how well the Canberra arts community has been coming together and is united at this time. What are the quick wins, or the gaps that could be quickly and easily filled, that have not yet been done? Have we had those quick wins now and is it the longer, more systemic stuff that needs to be the focus?

Miss Plevey: From the perspective of the independent artists, there were over 360 applications for Homefront. We are very grateful to the government and Minister Ramsay for spearheading that initiative so quickly, for independents. That revealed a huge gap, in that probably 300 independent artists were seeking support and help at that time. If they were unable to apply or be eligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper, if they had fallen through the gaps there, they were wondering whether they were left without support at all. That is very worrying for those 300 artists who maybe cannot teach anymore.

Finding a way out of it now will also be the challenge. How can we recapture those students that we are teaching with? Are they coming back? Are we getting the numbers that we once had or has it really dropped away? How do we rebuild this momentum? I do not think we can just pick up and go on as we were before. It will take a rebuilding period, especially with working in a studio with 10 people, four metres square per person, no rolling on the floor and no contact. All of these barriers to picking up and going on will mean that it will be a very staged process for dance and performing arts.

Ms Dyson: I would like to add to Alison's point there. With dance studios, music teachers and drama teachers, the performing arts have been lumped in with gyms. Anything that the Chief Minister or the Chief Medical Officer say about returning to work after COVID does not ever specifically mention the arts. We are not a gym. We are not an outdoor boot camp. There are all of these other things that we need to be

specifically given information about and that we are not. It is not clear enough how, when and why we can or cannot do things in the studio. That would be a really quick fix for us.

We have written to the national cabinet asking for national guidelines but they have not been forthcoming, so anything that the ACT government can do to provide us with clarity around those things soon would be great.

MS LE COUTEUR: Thank you very much for those comments. I asked a question about choirs of the minister and he said that it is all based on health advice. I thought there needed to be some sort of nuancing. That could be a committee recommendation. You have been pretty positive about some of the new changes that you have done. Given that in five years time, or preferably before that, presumably we will be finished with the COVID emergency, what do you see in terms of long-term changes for the arts, and your practices in particular? What will stick, particularly with funding, given that that has been one of the bigger issues?

Miss Plevy: Artistically, speaking from our experience, it has been a huge challenge. That has been a good thing—almost like a disruption of the normal cycle. As artists, we want to disrupt, surprise, be spontaneous and find new ways to create and experiment. Going forward, that has been a really welcome thing that we have had to deal with and adapt to. Artists are so resilient that we just make it work. We are used to moulding and shifting into different environments and different projects all the time. That is something that we as artists are good at.

It is exhausting, and the mental health thing has been a major issue for independent artists or company managers to constantly change and adapt to. I feel that there is a danger of burnout; there is a danger of exhaustion in the coming six months, year or however long it is. Long term, I feel that we will be there; we will be strong and we will come out of this. The arts are such a vital part of our ACT community and Australian life, and we want to be part of the solution and part of recovery and healing for our community. Use us as artists to find ways in which we can connect again and process what has happened. I feel that we want to be part of this other side, so to speak.

Ms Dyson: Alison has touched on something there: use our experience, our wisdom and our knowledge. We have all of those things that can support communities across the board and across the arts. I look at people like Alison, as an artist, doing so much for nothing. For how long can we keep this up as an arts community without us giving, giving, giving, working until midnight on a plan, getting up early to start filming or planning online classes?

This inadequate funding and inadequate acknowledgement of the role of the arts in our community is massive. We would love to see that changed as we come through this. We are all feeling a difference in our communication skills and the ways in which we appreciate each other and work together. I think people need to be appreciated a little bit more and artists should not be treated as though you are saying, “We can do without the arts. It’s not really an issue.” That is another thing that should come out of any recovery.

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately, we are very pressed for time today. No amount of time could do justice to all that you have to say and all that you are doing for our community. Thank you very much for connecting with us today. We look forward to making a series of recommendations in the interim report in the coming weeks. Again, thank you very much.

Ms Dyson: Thank you for having us.

Miss Plevey: Thanks very much, everyone. Stay well.

SOLLIS, MR MICHAEL, Co-ordinator, Canberra Artists Action Group
RIEF, MS ADELAIDE, Member, Canberra Artists Action Group
LEA, MS LIZ, Member, Canberra Artists Action Group

THE CHAIR: It is great to hear from representatives of Canberra Artists Action Group. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could I ask you to confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Mr Sollis: Yes, I understand the privilege statement.

Ms Rief: Yes, I understand the privilege implications of the statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for joining us today. We have 20 minutes for this segment of the hearing. Do you have a brief statement that you would like to make or shall we go straight to questions?

Mr Sollis: I have a brief statement. We recognise the wonderful work that the government has been doing in terms of supporting artists and the creative sector during COVID. Certainly, we recognise the incredible response from the Homefront funding. Almost 400 artists applied for that funding; there was an almost \$3 million ask for that. Similar funding pools would normally receive about 120 applications. I think this shows both the need that artists are facing at this time and the vibrancy of the creative ecology in Canberra and how it can assist the community during this time.

MR PETTERSSON: What further supports do you think the ACT government can provide for artists?

Mr Sollis: At the moment, one of the challenges is the lack of certainty. For everyone in the community, of course, that is a challenge, but artists face particular challenges, for two reasons. We are within those industries that rely on public gatherings. We are not alone in that regard, of course, but that is one reason why the uncertainty is very difficult. The other reason is that the contract situations that individual artists have with arts organisations are diverse and varied. There is not a one-size-fits-all policy, which means that federal government initiatives like JobSeeker and JobKeeper have been very hit and miss. Some artists are actually receiving more income than they otherwise would be and some artists are receiving absolutely nothing.

With those challenges, if the government was able to signal over the next 18 months measures that will be able to support artists in a similar way to Homefront, in a similar way that the funding for key arts organisations has done, that would certainly be something that would be particularly beneficial in ensuring that both artists and art forms can survive and that there is a sustainable pathway back to the real world.

MR PETTERSSON: Slightly more specifically, what should those programs look like—more of the Homefront program or something entirely different?

Ms Rief: One thing to say straight up is that artsACT would maintain the amount of funding that it is able to offer to artists. That is really important. I can understand that,

in times of scarcity, it can be something compelling. It is about maintaining that and, if possible, increasing the amount of funding that is available to artsACT to distribute to artists and arts organisations.

The next thing is that, fundamentally, arts organisations, the venues that they operate and the artists who use those venues will have to start thinking differently about how we perform and how we present work. It is really about basic stuff like how to do ticketing for a venue where you can only have a third of the people that you used to have in there. You can maybe have a family group sitting together, but they have to be 1.5 metres away. There are all of the practical considerations like how to have an interval in a theatre show.

Really practically, one of the things that would be quite useful is support for the organisations and the artists to come together and work through possible scenarios, then what the practical implications of enacting those scenarios would be. That might be some type of task force; it might be an advisory group that is able to seek specialist advice from both interstate and international peers who are dealing with this, to really understand what the implications for venues are. How can we physically adapt our venues? What are the real, practical ways that our programs and the way that we run our schedules and things like that can actually be adapted? Those are some of the key things that we are starting to look at, and something that would be quite helpful, in terms of a practical measure.

Another one that is coming up is that artists are relying heavily on the use of digital technology, live streaming and things like that, but the skills acquisition is a steep hill. The equipment is expensive and the expertise is expensive. There is an opportunity for the creative sector in the ACT to collaborate quite closely. We have a strong screen sector in the ACT. Essentially, what many artists are trying to do is produce live television. There is an opportunity for there to be collaboration. I am not sure exactly what that might mean; it could be mentorship, for example, between members of the screen sector and members of the arts sector, to understand better how we can create content that will be professionally presented and produced.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you for your insights so far. One of the things that we are interested in, and we touched on it with the Childers Group, are the numbers of people who are not receiving any assistance. Michael, you talked about some people receiving more income than they normally do and other people completely missing out. Are you aware of anyone who has quantified that, or any work that has been done to quantify that?

Mr Sollis: Not specifically in the ACT, no. One of the challenges that Canberra faces is that its arts scene is quite different to the scenes in other capital cities which have much wider union representation or are represented by other groups such as AMPAG, the Australian Major Performing Arts Group. There are not companies in Canberra of full-time artists—full-time orchestras, full-time ballet troupes or a full-time theatre. There is Canberra theatre, but the number of employees is on a different scale in other cities. In some ways it means that Canberra artists are actually more inclined to slip between the cracks that are already cracked because they are not represented by organisations like MEAA or NAVA. Liz has some personal experience of this.

Ms Lea: I did not say this at the beginning; I also understand the implications of the privilege statement. I am Skyping in from Gadigal land. I am still in Sydney. I was working overseas, touring my one-woman show, which was funded by artsACT, and also working in Kuwait. I came back before the state shutdowns happened, so I have not actually been back to Canberra for five months.

Just to follow up on what Adelaide has been saying about how we balance budgets, and what Michael is saying about independent artists potentially falling through cracks, I am an independent artist. I have worked with different organisations over the past 10 years but decided to go big and brave. Of course, I never expected COVID to happen this year.

It means that I have gone from being registered for GST as an individual—not because I personally earn a lot of money but because I employ a lot of people. Last year I employed 35 people in different capacities. In relation to your question, Mrs Dunne, it is tricky to articulate the range and number of people who are impacted because there are lots of different jobs that we undertake as artists, be it producing, teaching, nurturing, mentoring, or working in a cafe or a restaurant sometimes. As I say, two months ago I was registered for GST. I am now on JobKeeper, and I am very lucky. If I was not on JobKeeper I could well be homeless by the end of the year.

What has been interesting from my perspective as an independent is that, apart from good friends of mine like Alison, Julie and Ruth, I have not had a single organisation reach out to me and ask how I am going as an independent artist. I have had my artists come to me and say, “My goodness, has the project happened?” because they want me to be able to employ them. With the grants that I have in place, it has been tricky to get information about how I juggle those and manage those in relation to the benefits I have been able to receive.

MRS DUNNE: Are you currently in receipt of artsACT grants? I have been shown a postcoded flowchart that says, “Do you want to modify your grant?” Have you been approached?

Ms Lea: Yes, I have. I secured a grant in the last round, in July last year. I have a grant of \$46,000 sitting in my bank account, waiting to be spent. It was to produce a new work, premiere a new work, at Belconnen Arts Centre in November this year. That has now been delayed, potentially until March next year. The budget is fundamental to the box office income, which has gone down from potentially 10 grand to maybe two, if we can only have a tiny number of people in the audience. It has been tricky figuring out what to do with that money. My accountant has been helping me to either declare it or not. Obviously, it is all there and everything has been declared. I am extremely lucky; I secured a Homefront grant. Those are being released soon.

Going back to the other grant, my apologies; I have filled out that form about the change of the process. I recorded that that will hopefully now be happening in March next year. Of course, it means that, for all of the people who were planning their time and the income from that period of five weeks of rehearsals, we are not touching it. And we would not. Five weeks of employment for a freelance dancer is strong. That is a lot of employment.

MS LE COUTEUR: You were talking about lack of support. One of the things I am particularly interested in regarding the arts sector is whether you have been having any mental health support. Are you aware of anything that is available? Is this an issue?

Ms Rief: There is a really incredible program that was developed by Arts Centre Melbourne called the Arts Wellbeing Collective. That has provided a great range of resources to the sector as a whole. It is really beneficial. Support Act is the organisation that was able to provide support, originally to musicians primarily, but it has received support recently to extend that, and that is really beneficial.

Locally, one of the things that has been suggested by a couple of people is that a lot of arts organisations are run on very slim margins, and the ability to provide the type of mental health support that larger organisations can through employee assistance programs is pretty limited. One suggestion was that there could be an opportunity for the employee assistance program run by government to be extended, in certain circumstances, for artists and arts workers to access. The support that is there is really beneficial but it is not always available or consistent. Something locally provided would be really beneficial.

Ms Lea: If I may second that—without losing it. It is incredibly difficult. You lose all of your work. I was meant to be going back to work in Kuwait. I grew up living in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and I am very comfortable in Islamic countries, but I am so lucky that I got back. I have lost all of my work, though. It is very difficult. One of the big issues is that there is a huge step to get across to actually go in for JobSeeker or JobKeeper, because you think, “My goodness, I’m a dreadful artist and I can’t keep myself employed.” Some colleagues said, “Liz, it’s COVID. It’s not you.”

It is hard to reach out and ask for help. What has been brilliant, and I will articulate this very clearly, is that Michael and Adelaide in particular have been fundamental in keeping this CAAG group going, and it has been providing tacit emotional support for so many of us, just to know that this group is there. It is an unfunded group. It is the same with the Childers Group. We have been having a weekly dance gathering on a Friday; it is core, and we have been reaching out to each other.

Adelaide was talking about taking our classes online and effectively making live theatre for TV. I have been talking to a producer because I have a children’s show and I was thinking, “Okay, I’ve got to get my innovative hat on again. I’ve got a fabulous children’s show. How do we turn this into a television series and build on isolation?” This particular person said to me, “One of the hardest things to do when you lose your work is to keep your motivation going.” We are kind of chivvying each other along.

Mr Sollis: One of the unique things that I have seen through this is how much the community have come together, particularly in the creative sector. They have really come together. I mean that broadly; I mean media and government. With the meetings we have been having, we have had representatives of both major parties attend. I know that the Greens are always very supportive of the work that the arts do as well.

That speaks to how much goodwill the creative sector has amongst each other. Also,

the sector is ready both to address the challenges that it faces and to help with the broader challenges that the community is facing. With any investment, whether that is in giving access to mental health support or through funding such as Homefront, it is not just a support to those individual artists; it has a multiplier effect in terms of the way that that is spread into the broader community.

A wonderful example of this is the work that I am directly involved in at the moment. We have artists that are based in Canberra that are now leading and working with teachers across the country. In the next month they will be delivering live-streamed concerts to 30,000 kids across the country. In this time of physical isolation, that is incredible. With the support that that gives teachers both in Canberra and overseas, you cannot put a value on that. I think that the creative sector is unique in that sense. It has been wonderful to see how there has been bipartisan support. It identifies how valuable investment in creativity will be post COVID, because the sector is ready to meet those challenges, to lead the community and work with the community to ensure there is community cohesion and that wellbeing is enriched in what will be a very changed landscape after this.

MS CHEYNE: Thank you so much, particularly for sharing the very real, personal impacts that this is having and for being so candid. It is very helpful for us, although I appreciate how difficult it is to express that during this time. It is heard loud and clear by all of us that more funding would be enormously helpful. Are there any specific levers or ways that we go about things in the ACT or that artsACT goes about things that could be slightly modified to make things a little bit easier for artists and groups as we re-emerge? One of the simple levers that the government has been able to pledge for the hospitality sector has been allowing restaurants to offer takeaway alcohol, for example. I wonder whether there are things that do not necessarily have a dollar figure attached to them but where a signature or a line going through something might make things a little bit easier for artists, even if it is just for the short term.

Mr Sollis: There is one thing that would certainly help. The arts are probably one of the unique industries in that it is really cross-portfolio. We have artsACT, but the impact that arts has on education and on health, which are in different portfolios, is really significant. Both in the short term and in the long term, a lot of artists face some barriers because often the left hand in government is not necessarily talking to the right hand. If that was lubricated somehow, so that there was a way of working across portfolios on issues that affect the arts, that would certainly assist artists. The arts provide a very broad service.

Ms Lea: It is absolutely imperative that, wherever possible, or in all cases, with questions of access, be it the way in which programs are delivered, things that could be screen read, sign language, Auslan, audio description and all of those things, for all of the different artists with all of the different abilities that we all live with, everything is as accessible as possible.

There used to be a brilliant grant round with artsACT which was communities working with artists. You could have people like the GOLDS, a dance group of elders, who are phenomenal. There is Dance for Parkinson's. I am speaking from a dance perspective. There is also the incredible dementia choir. There are people living with intellectual disabilities. A huge number of dancers and actors live with Down

syndrome and autism.

It comes back to that notion of community that Adelaide and Michael were referring to, and the way in which the community comes together. We can feed in to the community in positive ways with the arts. If those kinds of grants reopen, it means those of us who are creating work in a professional capacity are able to apply for our own work. Community groups can also apply to work with professional artists to enhance, to re-nurture and to bring arts back and through into the community.

Mr Sollis: With the dollar-free ones, an example of that cross-portfolio thing would be, say, in education at the moment. It has been wonderful to see how the roadmap to recovery has mentioned the arts specifically. It has mentioned dance; it has mentioned all of those things. That is wonderful. An example would be in education, where a lot of artists work. All of those artists are beholden at the moment to individual principals and the decisions they are making because there is not a territory-wide approach as to how artists that are contracted by the schools or who have independent arrangements to use those facilities will be able to use the facilities down the track. For instance, if there was certainty around that in the short term, that would provide a huge benefit to artists. It would not just be in education; it would be in health as well. That is an example across portfolios.

THE CHAIR: We have to wrap it up. However, I understand that Adelaide may want to say something; then we will have to conclude.

Ms Rief: One other practical thing that has come up recently relates to my earlier point about access to equipment. The City Renewal Authority, for example, had in the past allowed Ainslie and Gorman Arts Centres, which is the organisation I work for, to borrow equipment that they have for events. Within government there is probably a great deal of equipment that could be really useful to arts organisations, with things like digital adaptation. Something like an equipment library from across government departments that would enable us to have free or very low-cost access to the equipment, instead of everybody having to buy a video camera and that sort of thing, might be really useful.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your very powerful, personal stories and for the very practical advice. If you have any further ideas about how the ACT government could assist artists, please feel free to email the committee secretary with those suggestions. Even if it is a dot-point list, we would be very happy to receive it in that format. Please feel free to get word out within the arts community that we would be very happy to receive that advice. Again, thank you very much for sharing your stories with us today.

McLEAN, MR IAN, Judge, Canberra Area Theatre Awards

WOOD, MS CORALIE, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Area Theatre Awards

THE CHAIR: It is a pleasure to welcome Mr McLean and Ms Coralie Wood to this committee hearing. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you each understand the implications of this document?

Mr McLean: I do, thank you.

Ms Wood: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Do you have an opening statement that you would like to make or should we go straight to questions?

Mr McLean: Straight to questions; that is fine with us.

THE CHAIR: Obviously, theatre productions are not happening. That was also evidenced by the fact that the CAT awards were in a different form this year. As we go out of this COVID crisis and go into the rebuilding phase, what additional support could the ACT government give the CAT awards, theatre companies and schools in the territory to help them to recover?

Mr McLean: If we just talk about the CAT awards for the moment, in its current form the CAT awards company is in fact winding up at the end of this year. Because of the issues the board have had with governance and with a lack of funding, it is no longer viable to go on. The board have decided to wind the company up at the end of this year. That is not to say there will not be an awards system. We are looking at having an awards system in a different format in some area.

I will briefly outline what we intend to do. We have written to every theatre company in the ACT. One of the issues we have had in recent years is that we have had a massive number of regional theatre companies as part of the CAT awards but a diminishing number of Canberra-based companies. We needed to address that, to try and get Canberra companies involved. We have written to all of those companies, inviting them to attend a meeting which will take place as soon as we can get back to gatherings of 30.

The major 13 companies here in Canberra have all indicated a desire to attend that meeting. Three are going to put forward proposals about how a new awards system or a reinvigorated awards system might work. With all of the companies together, we will facilitate a day at the start and probably appoint a committee of some sort from there. They will then refine and come to a consensus with all of the companies as to how an awards system might go.

From a CAT awards point of view, government assistance would be wonderful. One of our issues has been that, because we have so many regional companies involved, there is expense. The judges pay for their own transport and their own meals, to go

and judge shows, but the CAT awards have always paid for the accommodation. If we are sending five judges, say, to a show, let us say at 100 bucks a night for accommodation, and we were probably seeing two or three regional shows a week, that is a lot of money that it costs to send judges.

Through the grace of the judges, a lot of them have been paying their own way or only going when they have a relative in, let us say, Wollongong, with whom they can stay. That has been one of the difficulties. For Coralie, as the CEO, that has been a difficulty for her—having judges go out to support these things but not being covered in any way financially.

Once we get everything reconvened, we aim to get the Canberra companies together first; then we will get the regional companies. We cannot really foretell what might happen, but it may well be that we have a Canberra area theatre company, as we have always had. Maybe we will have Canberra and a region of an hour to an hour and a half away, so that the judges can go out and not have to be accommodated; they can just come back. There might have be to an offshoot of regional awards as well.

THE CHAIR: Do you receive artsACT or any other ACT government funding?

Mr McLean: None whatsoever.

Ms Wood: We do not receive any ACT government funding.

Mr McLean: And never have. I am a judge rather than being on the board, so I am not privy to everything that the board knows. To my knowledge, the only support that the CAT awards have ever had in 25 years is some subsidy towards the hire of Llewellyn Hall for the gala presentation nights in February every year. That happened probably in the earlier years but it has not happened in recent years at all.

Ms Wood: No, it certainly has not. It is not worth applying because we know they say, “You’re not worth it.” But we have been there for 25 years.

Mr McLean: I know the board have tried to look at funding through the tourism area as well, because of the number of visitors that the CAT awards bring to Canberra, particularly for the gala awards night. We are looking at maybe 600 or 700 and up to 1,000 people coming in. They probably stay for one or two nights in many cases, in accommodation terms. There is the tourism dollar that comes into the ACT. We have tried through artsACT funding and through tourism but without success.

THE CHAIR: In terms of the number of shows that enter the CAT awards each year and, if possible, a ballpark figure for the number of entries from the ACT, are you able to give us an indication?

Ms Wood: I can tell you that there are about 82 companies but not all are from the ACT. What was the other question?

THE CHAIR: The number of companies; and they are doing on average one or two shows a year?

Ms Wood: Yes, and that includes schools, of course. The local schools are very good.

Mr McLean: The total number of companies last year was 89. With the shows, it was about 150 or 160.

THE CHAIR: If you were to add up everybody working on a show, front of house, back of house and all of the other production support, are we talking about 50 to 100 people per show?

Mr McLean: That is pretty spot on. I was going to say around 70, at least. The actors in a standard show would be around 35 to 40. By the time you add in orchestra, front of house, directors, assistants et cetera, there would be another 40. Probably 80 to 100, I would say.

THE CHAIR: So it is a huge number.

Mr McLean: Yes, it is huge; and all struggling very much at the moment because of the lack of anywhere to release their artistic talents.

Ms Wood: We have been going for 25 years by ourselves and we wanted to continue—not necessarily me for another 25 years, or Ian. We would like to see it go on, because there is so much talent both in Canberra and in the surrounding regions. A lot of them have gone on to what I call the big people shows—the professional shows.

MS CHEYNE: Thank you for appearing today. I am sorry if I missed this in your earlier answer: why did the New South Wales funding wind up this year?

Ms Wood: We had a five-year contract and the fifth year was this year—the last year, really, for our big concert, which was supposed to be in February. The New South Wales government have been very supportive of us, but the Canberra government just do not want to know.

MS CHEYNE: At the end of that five-year funding period, were you invited to apply again for another five-year funding period? I am just curious, given the previous success you have had with—

Ms Wood: It was because of the fires and all of the things that happened; John Barilaro was the person involved. Yes, we have talked about it, and we probably would have, but then everything stopped.

Mr McLean: I think other priorities have obviously, and probably quite appropriately, taken over this year.

Ms Wood: Yes.

THE CHAIR: But there is still some hope that that might come through from the New South Wales government?

Mr McLean: An application has not been put in, a funding application, as far as I am aware.

Ms Wood: No.

Mr McLean: No funding application has gone in as yet.

Ms Wood: No, it has all been too hysterical.

MS LE COUTEUR: Are you thinking of putting in a funding application in a few months time, when, hopefully, the COVID situation will be at least clearer?

Mr McLean: That is a good question. We are probably a little bit undecided at the moment. Because we are now trying to reinvigorate the awards under another banner, and because the board of directors has decided to wind up CAT Awards Ltd, my thought would be that once we have convened a meeting, which we hope will take place in June, and we have a different organisation, funding applications would go to the ACT government and, depending on what the structure is for the regions, the regions themselves, if they become a subsidiary to the Canberra awards, would then apply for funding through the New South Wales government.

Ms Wood: The New South Wales government have always been the one that has looked after us.

MS LE COUTEUR: Obviously, you have talked to a lot of theatre groups. What would you say would be the message from them as to how they can be supported in these hard times?

Mr McLean: That is a really good question. I have talked to a few, just to find out what their thoughts are. Everyone is very supportive of the way that the government is dealing with the issues at the moment. The problem that the artistic theatre people have is a fear of not knowing when they might be able to get back. They need to practise their skills but there is no way of practising their skills.

To use an example, producers are very frightened about when they would be able to use a theatre again. In the foreseeable future, with a 300-seat theatre, it is looking like a maximum of 100 people would be able to attend a production, in the next few months at least. A production is not viable with only a third of the seating available. Producers will be very reluctant to try to stage theatre for the foreseeable future.

Actors are very unsure about the realism that they will be able to have in theatre with social distancing. How do they perform a love scene in the musical *Carousel* or something like that? There is a fear that the realism of acting will go. By the same token, there is no opportunity for them to practise their skills and to maintain and develop those skills.

They all realise, though, that that is just the way it is at the moment. They are saddened and fearful, but what is the solution? There isn't one. Everyone is very supportive of the way political parties of both persuasions have been handling this. The more that the restrictions are lifted, the more chance we will have.

All of the shows that were programmed for this time of the year were in rehearsal in

March, when everything was cancelled. There has not been a rehearsal take place of anything. It is probably not feasible to think that anything could start rehearsing until probably July-August. It is a three-month run for a pro-am production to get up. It will be November-December before it is even feasible that a show could go on. Producers will be reluctant to put up the money to put on a show without some sort of surety.

Ms Wood: In May we had nine shows to go to, and we did not get to any of them.

THE CHAIR: Thinking of *Carousel*, you'll never walk alone!

Mr McLean: Very good.

MRS DUNNE: I would like to go back to the point that Ian made about producers being reluctant to engage. Will the availability and the cost of venues be an even bigger deterrent? I know that it is always a problem and we have lost one venue, in that there is no longer an arts centre at the ANU. Where do you see the venues being, and what might we need to do to incentivise producers to produce?

Mr McLean: That is a good question. You are right; the venues that are currently feasibly available are the Q at Queanbeyan, the Erindale Theatre, the new theatre at Gungahlin, possibly the Street Theatre—it is more attuned to professional smaller productions rather than the bigger productions—and the Canberra Theatre.

Ms Wood: And boys grammar.

Mr McLean: Yes, some of the schools have venues, but they are limited, obviously, in what they can do with lighting and sound production. How do we subsidise or assist producers in doing that? I honestly do not know. That is really hard. I am digressing a little bit here. Because actors and musicians are all self-employed contractors, they have found it very difficult to get any assistance through the JobKeeper or JobSeeker type funding.

I have probably talked more to musicians than to actors in this line, but unless they have been able to go back to doing a bit of teaching, their income has just gone altogether; it went to absolutely nothing. The options were to maybe try to reskill and go to JobSeeker through a reskilling process, looking at working in retail, hospitality or something like that. As we all know, artistic people are loath to do that. I am particularly talking about musicians. Professional musicians here in Canberra since early March have had nothing.

There have been some really good, innovative-type things that people have done. There is one that I discovered. It is a thing called Live In Ya Lounge. It is being put together by an actress, Lexi Sekules. It is using one of the pavilions at EPIC. Every Friday night they do a big production concert, with big lighting and big sound, and that is being streamed live. People who watch that streaming are asked to donate.

I have asked the musicians who have been involved in that sort of thing—there is a great little band called Archie that are on tomorrow night—whether it seems like they are begging or whether it is a glorified busking-type thing. They do not see it as that; they see it as sharing their art.

Government might be able to subsidise that sort of thing. That can maybe be extended to theatre—subsidising the production costs of something like that before it goes out to the live stream. As I mentioned before, this is one really good way that musicians particularly—it would extend to actors—are able to maintain their skills.

Ms Wood: Theatre publicists like me never get anything. All of my shows, such as the *Wizard of Oz*, have gone. Going back to the CAT awards, we started it 25 years ago. I have been passionate about it—

MRS DUNNE: I remember it well.

Ms Wood: Good. I just want to see it going on. There are so many good actors, actresses, singers and dancers in the non-professional groups who have gone on to become professional.

Mr McLean: Thinking about theatre again, I mentioned it might be November before we could see anything coming back. With the social distancing, particularly for singers—choirs obviously are affected by this, and choruses in *Carousel* singing *You'll Never Walk Alone*—they are not going to be able to do that for a long time because of the health issues of singing together. That will affect musical productions for a long time. A solution? I do not know. We have to find a vaccine, I guess. That is the standard thing.

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately, we are out of time, so we do have to leave it there. Coralie, do you have one final comment?

Ms Wood: I just want to see the CAT awards go ahead, please.

THE CHAIR: That is a good note to finish on.

Ms Wood: And we need your help.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ian and Coralie. A copy of the transcript will be sent through. Please review that and make sure that it is all correct.

BALLANTYNE, MR DANIEL, Director, MusicACT

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, and welcome to this Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. It is great to have Daniel Ballantyne, the Director of MusicACT, with us. I understand that you have been sent a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of that document?

Mr Ballantyne: I do, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Very good. Would you like to make an opening statement, or should we go straight into questions?

Mr Ballantyne: I will make a short opening statement.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Mr Ballantyne: As I am sure most of you are well aware, the music industry, along with the arts and entertainment worlds, was very heavily and immediately impacted by the necessary actions to meet the COVID-19 crisis. The phrase that got around was “from income to zero in days”. Furthermore, because of the structural nature of the music industry in particular, you have highly motivated people who unfortunately work in highly precarious positions. I think you would be well aware of many examples of the casualised work and artists who rely on the gig economy, who have just seen their income completely disappear.

However, we feel that in the ACT the music industry was bottlenecked, anyway. We saw the continual closing of live music venues in the ACT. Most recently, we have seen Mr Wolf close its doors during this period, and we are seeing another major venue having to move. I have just spoken to the owners of Smith’s Alternative, and they are telling me that it is unlikely that they will be opening any time soon. So long as there are social distancing constraints, the possibility of a live music venue working viably, where audiences cannot go shoulder to shoulder, is almost impossible. That is also backed up audiences. The recent Australia Council assessment of “What cultural activity would you go and see?” had live music, unfortunately, at the very bottom. So it is a very tough situation.

But there is an upside. From what I have observed in the ACT in particular, a lot of musicians have been writing, recording and finding new activities, and the release rate for new music in the ACT—and, indeed, around Australia and around the world—is at an all-time high. So we have a lot of new recorded music going out and we have seen some great initiatives, both public and private in the ACT. In particular, the Homefront response of artsACT, which is obviously funded by the ACT government, was an extraordinary success. I was delighted to be able to help at least 20 applications. Twelve were successful, and it represented, at least in arts funding, a significant shift in support for contemporary musicians. I think that was a really good sign.

Probably the largest cultural initiative happening in the ACT at the moment is a

private venture, although I note that RISE Canberra has caught up to it. That was Live In Ya Lounge. EAVS audiovisual services established it, firstly in their own premises, back at the end of March, with a live broadcast of probably one of the largest bands to come out of Canberra, Hands Like Houses. They did a streaming gig where they got 70,000 views, which is quite extraordinary, and generated some \$12,000 in merchandise and donations—absolutely nothing like the major gigs they had planned for this year, but at least a start.

That model was taken forward, by EAVS, to a hire at the EPIC showgrounds. They have a warehouse out there and every Saturday at 7.30 ACT bands are streaming to audiences roughly in the 3,000 to 7,000 range, which is quite extraordinary. Many artists have been programmed there. I might add that my colleague Joel Tyrrell from MusicACT has been actively programming ACT bands into this. I do not know of any other activity in Canberra where artists are performing to those numbers, currently. There would be nothing. I know that there are efforts to stream galleries and that the Canberra Theatre Centre has a page full of places you can go to see productions and things, but the numbers for ACT artists have been truly extraordinary.

I might add that EAVS is presenting that at its own cost. At the moment it is paying commercial rates for the use of EPIC, which I think is, quite frankly, disgraceful. What we want to look at is a post-COVID recovery where live music entertainment, live performance, has a place in the recovery. We believe that the ACT government made a major initiative last year with the emergence of the entertainment action plan. We believe that work on that has stalled, or we have not heard anything further about it, despite some recent requests. I can understand that there are other priorities at the moment, but this forum is here to discuss the future, I believe, and the entertainment action plan is a fantastic opportunity to revive nightlife and entertainment and economic development around the kind of investment that young people can commit to in the live entertainment industry.

We believe that there are significant constraints on accessing and establishing businesses that play live music. We have had a long-time commitment to the establishment of an entertainment precinct—initially, in the Civic city centre, around the Melbourne Building, Bunda Street and City Walk. Unfortunately, the entertainment action plan does not go to the specifics of that; it just proposes further consultation. We want to see some serious policy development and we also believe, from policy planning experts, that the planning tools are currently available. It does not require a significant policy effort to achieve what we think could be a significant source of development and growth once we find new ways to manage in a COVID environment.

I say that because many conventional retail businesses, due to the economic recession that we are moving into, are struggling and will close, and there will be a lot of street-level retail properties and falling rents, making reinvestment in venues and other activity in the city highly attractive. Unfortunately, if we continue to promote residential development in the city, with the dilemma of strata title and the impossibility of change for the purposes of, say, sound regulation or specific commercial use, the city will become locked down and you will be unable to develop a night-time economy, especially with noise constraints.

Many in the government would be familiar with our efforts to bring in people like John Wardle and Frank Henry from New South Wales and Queensland respectively—people who have actively worked on the planning, sound regulation and economic incentives that can allow a night-time economy to flourish. But for the ACT to have a music industry that is not constrained by the bottleneck around live performance—with the very large number of musicians which are currently recording and could easily come back to live performance—we need to make some significant reforms in this area. That is my COVID-19 committee message.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering, Mr Ballantyne, if you could outline what support the music industry needs to get through the COVID pandemic?

Mr Ballantyne: Yes, sure. We put it to a number of government officials, almost two months ago, that probably one of the most significant and simple things you could do would be to support and promote, for example, the Live In Ya Lounge platform. I would have to say that the RISE Canberra effort launched this week was at least two months off the pace compared to, say, the Victorian situation. If you go to the Victorian government’s “what to do in COVID-19” page, the top entry is Music Victoria live streaming. That is how they promote it, and they have been doing it for several months. It has taken a private effort to get it up, and the RISE Canberra people have just joined in on that this week.

It needs to be joined to a significant promotional campaign so that Canberrans know that not only is this platform available for live music—and that is easily the most popular thing that is happening at the moment—but that it could be used for so much more. We have got the technical capability and the promotional capability right here, right now. So that is something that could and should be done.

The continuation of the terrific funding initiatives that artsACT has been driving—the broadening of that and the accessibility of that kind of funding—should be increased and improved. Just as the bars and restaurants have had a pretty good focus, there needs to be a focus on not only the planning and regulatory stuff but the practicalities of how you open a live music venue in a social distancing environment. We are seeing a lot of quite clever initiatives privately, but the government could be talking to operators and venue managers and businesses that are interested in live music and just getting their take. For example, the manager of the Old Canberra Inn, Ben Johnston, who is on our committee, is coming up with all sorts of interesting ways for live music to have an opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CHEYNE: Thank you for appearing today. You just said that the Canberra RISE website had come about from a private initiative or—I am sorry, I may have misheard that—private efforts. Are you able to expand on what that was?

Mr Ballantyne: Okay. RISE Canberra is a government initiative out of EventsACT.

MS CHEYNE: Yes.

Mr Ballantyne: They launched that. Effectively, it is a TV and live-streaming studio that was created by Events Audio Visual Services, which is a private business, which, on its own initiative, established this studio for the purposes of broadcasting and streaming live music. Rob and that crew have been out there pushing this for months, and we had been putting to our contacts in EventsACT, “This is out there; please get onto it,” and it happened this week.

THE CHAIR: With regard to the private venues—in particular the bars and pubs that support live music and the clubs as well—have you had any feedback from them about whether they see live music as viable in, let’s say, a concert sense but more so, dare I say, in a background sense?

Mr Ballantyne: The short answer is no. It is not considered viable, but what is happening seems to be the creation of special events in rooms or spaces where a level of social distancing can be managed for groups of people. Where are we at now? I think we are at 20 or 50. People are buying quite expensive food and beverage packages, and live music is included. That is beginning to provide some opportunities for performers, but it is absolutely nothing like an artist-focused live music venue like Transit or Smith’s or the Basement in Belconnen, where you have a program, a genre and a following. We are talking about musicians being found to provide entertainment for a package for a food and beverage business.

MS CHEYNE: That has really just covered what I was going to ask. We are talking to the Basement this afternoon and they have clearly been doing these packages—an intimate evening with a heavy metal band.

Mr Ballantyne: Yes.

MS CHEYNE: I was just curious if that was something that other venues were looking at doing, but I think you have answered my question.

Mr Ballantyne: I am aware of at least two others—Capital Brewing and Old Canberra Inn. From a music scene point of view, we are still dealing with the collapse of the Phoenix on East Row, which was a huge blow. In terms of those seminal venues, there is Transit and Smith’s. Transit is moving. Mr Wolf has closed, and Smith’s is just waiting for a time when it thinks it can get back into this. Nigel and Beth are enjoying a great holiday at the moment because they were pretty tired by the time this came around.

MS CHEYNE: Has Mr Wolf closed for good?

Mr Ballantyne: I do not know. I think it is closed because of the current conditions and it is struggling to come up with an alternative way to go. What is the name of the electronic music venue above the Phoenix? I am sorry, I have just gone blank on the name, but they have been streaming electronic music from France and stuff like that pretty well, but it is not a business model; it is just keeping the brand alive and keeping certain DJs and musicians going.

THE CHAIR: It is a shame that you can name these venues on one hand.

Mr Ballantyne: Yes. I have been in the ACT for seven years and I have seen, in my short time here, at least four venues close. It is a problem that the government has been well aware of, going back to early inquiries into the urbanisation of the city. We saw that come to a head last year, thanks to Caroline and others, where the government undertook to lay down an entertainment action plan and there was consultation. A document was produced, and it was a very positive sentiment and setting a direction, but the particulars of that document in terms of policy are almost non-existent.

It is our belief that for very little money you could produce, in cooperation with the music industry, a policy to government which could be considered. It would focus on the kinds of planning and regulatory incentives that I have already spoken about. That could produce a significant outcome for very little money. It is not a funding issue; it is an incentivising and business issue—an economic development issue. And we know it works because other jurisdictions have done it and are doing it. The Western Australians, up until the COVID crisis, were just about to open their entertainment precinct, with new laws and planning provisions. We have had the longstanding example of the Valley in Brisbane. The latest economic research indicates that, across Brisbane city, the fastest economic development area until COVID was the Valley, and that compares to office use and all sorts of other development across the city.

MS LE COUTEUR: I have a lot of questions I would like to ask, but I have one, hopefully, very quick one: have you received any sort of [*Interruption in sound recording*—] as to how to operate as musicians and people who are trying to perform in a group and with live audiences? We have heard from a couple of other groups that, no, they have not and there might be something you could learn.

Mr Ballantyne: I will just repeat the question. How are musicians receiving advice about what they could be doing, how they could be—

MS LE COUTEUR: Is the only advice you are getting saying, “Twenty people per venue; that’s it”? Or are you getting advice around people who are singing—whether they are putting out songs? Or are singers different from drummers? Could you tell us—

Mr Ballantyne: What have we been doing to help musicians?

MS LE COUTEUR: Yes, or what advice have you been getting, or what have you been—

Mr Ballantyne: We have been receiving a lot of advice from the ACT government. I sit on a fortnightly COVID-19 panel which is organised by artsACT. In so much as there is relevant information, we put that up on our socials or our website. Our focus has been to provide musicians with starting and entry-level information about what they could be doing while they do not have a live performance opportunity. We have been engaging very heavily about programming Live In Ya Lounge and also seeking direct funding assistance—not just ACT funding but Australia Council and other funding packages which have been available through other music organisations in Australia, including in Victoria.

Yes, we have been trying to do those kinds of things. I understand that there are some new developments coming through on what is possible, given social distancing requirements, for arts organisations. The music industry tends to hold itself in a slightly different frame than possibly the broader arts sector because it is focused on recording and live performance in commercial venues. Until such time as audiences can stand shoulder to shoulder, I think that aspect of our business is going to remain problematic. But that is not to say that contemporary musicians, recording artists, are not coming up with other things to do. There is a lot of songwriting and a lot of recording going on at the moment, and I think that that is a good sign.

MS LE COUTEUR: And how are artists managing to survive financially, given everything?

Mr Ballantyne: It depends on who you talk to. I think most artists have got multiple sources of income, and they are falling back on what else they can do, or they are going straight to JobKeeper or JobSeeker. I know that many bands are run as small businesses and they have been eligible for JobKeeper, but the big issue, as most of you would be aware, is the casualised nature of employment in the sector. That has kept most people out of JobKeeper, so they are on JobSeeker. I do know that there are a few green shoots around. Of course, many musicians, including people that I know immediately, are already starting to find work in the hospitality industry. So that is starting to happen again, but I know what they would rather be doing.

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately, we are very pressed for time. Daniel, thank you very much for presenting very useful, very practical and heartfelt evidence. We will be making some interim recommendations in the coming weeks, and we will do all that we can to lobby for the best possible outcome for a much-cherished part of the Canberra community. Thanks again.

Mr Ballantyne: Thank you.

BEAVER, MR MARTIN, Owner, Beaver Galleries

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon. Thank you very much for joining us today on the telephone. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications and that you are okay with that?

Mr Beaver: Yes, I have. Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Great; thank you very much. Do you have any opening remarks that you would like to make, or shall we go straight to questions?

Mr Beaver: No, go straight to questions.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you, Mr Beaver, for your time today. As the operator of a longstanding gallery in the ACT, how have you been able to adapt or change your model of business to make this close-down not so terrible, and do you see any sort of green shoots about the way galleries might operate in the future as a result of this?

Mr Beaver: Obviously, we had to pivot a little more into the online space, but the reality is that there is actually quite a big debate in the visual arts as to what the value of online is. The reality that I think we need to accept is that most people will not buy art online. And generally I would not advise people to do that anyway, unless they are very familiar with the artist or have seen the work already or something like that. The problem is that the bricks-and-mortar model actually promotes the visual arts and brings new clients into the world. Online does not tend to bring new people; it tends to just talk to the people that you are already in conversation with. We moved our shop. We have a gallery shop here; we moved that online. We had to do that very quickly. It took us three or four weeks to get that up and running. That has kind of worked, but, again, it mostly trades off people who already know what we do. So I think we use online, basically, for marketing. We do much more social media. We kept the gallery open, but by appointment only. And that was reasonably effective.

MRS DUNNE: The by appointment only process would put—

Mr Beaver: Yes, I mean—

MRS DUNNE: It kept the buyer in touch with you?

Mr Beaver: Yes, that is right. We did the same on the website. The idea was that there seemed to be a critical thing. It was very confusing, I have to say, as to what was happening with retail. There were no real directives about retail, but obviously people were being told not to go out, so there was a bit of a contradiction in terms there. But what we felt we needed to do was basically to create as safe an environment as possible. So we did viewings by appointment, and we said that there would be only one household or one person at a time. We were doing temperature checking and had the sanitiser out and so on. Basically, we made people feel as though it would be safe enough to come out and have a look. Generally, they were coming to look at something they had seen online and then wanted to see in the flesh—and that worked.

Obviously, numbers were way, way down, but everybody that came was pretty committed already.

MRS DUNNE: Thanks.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering if you could talk us through how Canberrans have responded to your gallery during this time? Have you seen an outpouring of support? Have you seen increased or decreased interest in your gallery?

Mr Beaver: I think the support has been quite good, but partly because we have been here a long time. We have a good, strong support base already. A lot of people do not understand how commercial galleries operate. We represent a group of artists, so not only do you have support for the gallery, but you have support for the artists. We are not just an exhibiting space; we support a small group of artists on a long-term basis. So you share in the support you get for the artists as well as the gallery.

But, yes, I know of some cases where people purchased things from us really just to support our operation and our artists. I would say, too, that it was a little bit of a result of people who are spending more time at home thinking, “We really should get something for that wall. It’s driving me crazy.” So, funnily enough, it was not as big a disaster as it could have been. I think we were strong enough, and had a strong enough brand, to be able to keep going through that.

We lost some staff, obviously. We kept permanent staff but we lost our casual staff. The JobKeeper thing has been a bit of a saviour for us. We have deferred bank interest on the building, because we own the building as well. Our biggest cost—I am just starting to get involved in this, trying to work out what is happening with the commercial tenancy relief—is the rates, which are just overwhelming. The reduction I think we can get is not that significant and, to be honest, it has taken a very long time to come to fruition. There has been at least a month and a half between announcement and execution, as far as I can see.

THE CHAIR: With regard to the government’s arts policy in general, much of that is geared towards not-for-profit organisations and independent or sole-trader artists. People such as yourselves have invested heavily and have a high-risk operation, given all that is tied up with the entity. For you and the relatively few other commercial galleries in Canberra, is there much of an opportunity to connect with the ACT government regarding your aspect of arts policy?

Mr Beaver: Yes; thanks, Alistair. We have tried over the years. I would have to say—this may sound a slightly bald statement—that the government’s arts policy takes no account at all of commercial art galleries. In fact, I think most of the people formulating that policy barely know we exist, even though in reality we provide much more support to artists than the ACT government does. Unfortunately, it becomes a self-serving thing. ArtsACT does a great job of working with artists and, as you say, there are the so-called not-for-profits. They are all forced to sell at some point or another, so they become our competition. But the government’s arts policy does not encompass organisations like us at all, as far as I can see. The contact that we have had with them over the years has been amiable but, honestly, we are not part of the landscape as far as they are concerned.

THE CHAIR: Obviously, there is commercial-in-confidence and everything else, but are you able to give a ballpark of how many artists you support through sales or exhibitions at the gallery?

Mr Beaver: It would be about 50.

THE CHAIR: Right.

Mr Beaver: Commercial galleries vary in terms of the numbers. We are bigger physically, so we can deal with more. We run two exhibitions at the same time. We often give one of our artists a solo every two to two-and-a-half years. A lot of it is based on physical limitations. We can deal with about 50, and we can manage that quite well. A lot of the artists may be showing in one or two other galleries in other cities. Basically, they are professional artists, and that is how they operate. They sell their work through the commercial gallery sector and every now and again they may apply for government grants to tackle a specific project or residency. But they make their living through businesses such as ours.

MS CHEYNE: Thank you, and thank you for appearing. It sounds like the visits by appointment only have worked reasonably well in the circumstances. With the changes to restrictions, will you open a little bit more, to have more people in, or will you continue with the appointments for the next little while?

Mr Beaver: Actually, we have new exhibitions, in theory, opening today. We would have had an opening event tonight, which obviously we are not doing. We have opened our doors and set a limit—it is arbitrary—of 10 people at a time in the gallery. The gallery is quite large, as any of you who have been there would know, so we could have more than 10 people, but, again, the idea is to make people feel safe. The name of the game with businesses is making people want to come out again. Our cafe had to close, under the restrictions, but we have never had to close. But the reality is that Canberrans stayed home. That is why we are in such a good position, I guess, in terms of the epidemic. Particularly with what we do—because you cannot do it all online—we need people to feel comfortable enough to come in.

So at the moment our doors are open. We have hand sanitiser. This sounds like nitpicking, but one of the hardest things to do in all this, when businesses were trying to stay open, was to buy hand sanitiser. I had to buy it on the black market, for God's sake, at about \$100 a bottle, just so we could offer it to our clients when they came in. But we are open. We will temperature check people. In fact, the controls here are probably tighter than they are at most airports, as far as I can see. We just want people to feel safe and spend some time here, and that seems to be working.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. I am mindful of the time. Ms Le Couteur, do you have any questions?

MS LE COUTEUR: Just a quick one. What has the impact been on the artists that you represent?

Mr Beaver: Well, they have all seen a significant downturn. I have to say, though, in

general the art market has been a little bit flat for probably 18 months to two years. One of the big things that has happened is that art fairs have had to be cancelled. While art fairs are a really good way of making sales, they are also a good way of promoting work. The Sydney art fair has been cancelled and the Melbourne art fair has been postponed until February. Those are big events and big marketing events. They get people re-engaged. Generally, our artists have noticed a significant downturn. For the artists with good commercial galleries representing them, like us, it has not been as big a disaster as it could have been. They still have some income. For an independent, non-represented artist, what is happening would be horrible, I would imagine. For anyone working in the performing arts, I guess there is just no opportunity at all.

MS LE COUTEUR: Have your artists been able to get JobKeeper or JobSeeker, or have things been going well enough that that has not been an issue for them?

Mr Beaver: My understanding is that one or two of them have managed to get JobKeeper payments. I know of one or two who got JobSeeker. It is a funny thing, to be honest: it is not that visual artists are government shy, but they are certainly bureaucracy shy. If they can still support themselves through their practice, that will be their primary concern. A lot of them might be operating from a fairly low-cost base—they could have a studio at home or something—so it is unlike the gallery, where you have to have a commercial building and staff and so on. I think it would be fair to say that they can shrink slightly and still not disappear, whereas with businesses you often cannot shrink very much until you disappear.

THE CHAIR: Mr Beaver, thank you very much for giving a unique perspective to the committee today. You will be sent a copy of the transcript in the coming weeks. Please review that and make sure that it is accurate. Again, thank you very much for appearing today.

Mr Beaver: It is an absolute pleasure. Thank you.

FOX, MR LANCE, Owner, The Basement

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, Mr Fox. It is a pleasure to have you here today representing The Basement in Belconnen, a well-known institution that so many Canberrans are familiar with. I understand you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand that document?

Mr Fox: I do.

THE CHAIR: Very good. Do you have any opening remarks, or should we go straight to questions?

Mr Fox: Dive straight into questions. I have just taken some notes against what the general questions were and have some opinion pieces, but I also have a few bits and pieces that I hope will be helpful.

THE CHAIR: Very good.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you very much, Mr Fox, for appearing today. One of the things I would like to concentrate on, as much as we can, is the green shoots—the positives. You are in a space where you have been able to innovate a little. Could you tell the committee about the changes you have made to your business practice and how that is assisting keeping the arts, and in your case music performers, going at this time?

Mr Fox: Yes; thank you. Obviously, we were shut down, as was everybody, and we immediately lost all of our international and national bookings for a period of about eight months, going forward. I do not believe that we will see any tours of that scale coming back for 12 to 18 months. We were very lucky that we had the Chompy's restaurant attached to our venue. Because people were in quarantine and not able to go out, they were very actively ordering food, delivered from us, which has really helped us keep some people employed.

We took the first available opportunity to put a live music show on, which was last weekend, for dinner and drinks with a fairly well-known dim metal band called Witchskull. It was quite a remarkable juxtaposition to be sitting there watching this shoegaze heavy music whilst having dinner and drinks served to you at your table a la business class. It sold out four 10-person shows—we did two-hour sessions and managed the capacity of the room through that—within a few hours. There was an enormous amount of uptake. I think we managed to sell those tickets at \$100 each and a few people have actually come back saying that they will not be able to see a show at The Basement unless they can do it business class again. They really quite enjoyed that.

Some people said they found it quite awkward. They actually felt isolated, interestingly enough, sitting at their table and raising their hands to have some drinks poured for them and watching the band without having the community immersion that they really like—the reason people go to see live music. But some people said it was probably the best thing that they have ever done in their life, so that was great. And

we had an opportunity to do a live recording of the band in the space. We had time to set that up, which was amazing. The video is up online now, and it has come up incredibly well. It is a really great thing for the artist; they get some incredible content and the ability to run through the show a few times.

We have the ability to showcase, I guess, that we are not dead, and perhaps give people a bit of hope that we are coming back. I think it is what some people like. We are currently booking the next few weeks with 20-person shows—sit-down and dinner. We have got local punk classics, the girls from Glitoris, who are quite politically outspoken and quite fabulous, coming in to do two sessions. It is the same kind of concept—for a \$100 ticket, sit down, experience the band, experience the space and feel like you can get out and do something while still maintaining reasonable social distancing.

There are a couple of other things we are looking at—other alternative arts things. We are trying to book a burlesque show again. But that already sits in that space because (a) we do not get more than 20 people and (b) it sits in that graceful space of a sit-down dinner. On top of that, we are working really strongly to try and get some of the live-streaming components happening—we have seen a lot of people doing that—and working out how people can be charged for the event. This opens it up to other Australians, other people around the world, and people around Canberra who possibly cannot get out to come and see a show. So we want to sort of connect that as a part of our regular service offering.

We have been talking about that for a long time, but you are running a business; you have a lot of other bits and pieces—a lot of moving parts—to think about, so it has always sat there in the background. One of the great benefits—and I will talk to this a bit—is that we have had that opportunity to reset, rethink and look at what the future holds for us and how we can improve our service offering, reaching more people, more vulnerable people—that kind of stuff.

We will possibly even extend our thing. We are pretty well known for being a fairly heavy genre, but we spend a lot of time building that space and we have a lot of artists who come to play at The Basement other than the heavy metal bands. Some people do not seem to realise that. We are looking at getting more of those sit-down shows, perhaps more comedy, more kind of open mic-type things, and more of that alternative community. That space is moderately well covered by places like Smith's Alternative and the space where the Phoenix used to be. It has been a good opportunity for us to start to move into that space and get set. It is quite good.

MS CHEYNE: Thank you, Mr Fox, for appearing. I imagine this is the first time The Basement has appeared before a parliamentary inquiry.

Mr Fox: Yes, it is.

MS CHEYNE: Maybe you will appear at many more. What you have been able to achieve in a short amount of time is really commendable. Without wanting to go into issues which are commercial-in-confidence, what has been the impact on you as a business and how fortunate has it been to have the success of Chompy's and the take-up of Chompy's? Is what you are looking to do with these sit-down experiences

going to be able to sustain The Basement while we ride this out over the next little while? We heard from Mr Ballantyne earlier about venues closing down and the viability of venues. I am just hoping to know that we will see The Basement stick around for as long as possible.

Mr Fox: Yes. It has had a significant impact. We have been watching our business track beautifully over the last few years. We have been watching the community support us and the uptake increase. As well, we have seen the physical elements of the business growing. We have been very lucky. We feel pretty confident, going forward. We have an incredibly supportive community. We have created a space that I could not be more proud of. I regularly say that The Basement community and the way the business works has literally reaffirmed my faith in humanity, which is really counterintuitive when you think about owning a pub of any kind, let alone a large space. You would expect that there would be somewhere where you would get worn down and be like, “I’m not doing it anymore.”

You mentioned that there are a lot of other venues around the country that are talking about the fact that they just simply will not open up again. There is a financial impact on a small business if they do not have their ducks in a row—let’s say they have missed a couple of BASs. They are still going to have their on-cost levied against them. And when margins are really small—and they really are in this space; you might be able to make some good money on a show with some volume, but most of the shows are not that—you really have to plan and look to the month or quarter that you are working with to try and make sure that you are going to be able meet your commitments elsewhere.

There have been a lot of businesses that have simply gone, “I’m not going to do this for another three years to catch up. It would be simpler for me to go and close this down and go and get a job at McDonald’s, where I’d work fewer hours and make more money.” That will be the case for a lot of businesses. I can quickly look at any of those businesses with a capacity of 200 and see what their margins are going to be, what their likely capacity is and how many seats in-house they are going to sell for each show and work it out. On top of that, for us the thing is that we might get a straight edge hardcore band come through that sells the place out—700 tickets; fantastic—but they do not drink anything. They drink soft drink. And so we have extra staff, extra security—extra, extra, extra—all with real costs attached, but we end up with a couple of thousand dollars, which does not butter any parsnips. So it is a hard space.

Going forward, I have a lot of faith because of the community and particularly the robustness of the musicians. I say here that a musician is someone who puts \$4,000 worth of equipment into a \$400 car to drive 400 kilometres to get paid 40 bucks. These people are salty. They have been in the industry for a long time and they do it because they are passionate about it. They are not going to go away, and the patrons are going to be there.

The biggest risk to my business—I guess we are salty and pretty tenacious as well; you have to be to be in business, full stop, or to have any success in business—is going to be cashflow. My landlord has been very generous, but as some of the other bits and pieces start to trickle away we will have a bit of a cashflow lag. We will see

that in six months time and then again in 12 months time, and we will desperately have to claw our way back through, trying to make sure that we can continue to meet our commitments. There will not be any cash sitting around in the background for us, and if a piece of equipment breaks—and it is all very, very expensive—where does that come from? That is the thing. I do have a lot of faith.

MS CHEYNE: Do you have musicians knocking on your door to do these intimate sessions?

Mr Fox: That is so funny. I went out to all of the famous people that I have got to know personally over the last few years and said, “Please help.” I went out to all of the big promoters who we have worked with for years and who we have actively supported, paying enormous guarantees to get people to Canberra who were not here before. By actively doing this and working with these promoters we built a market in Canberra that had died for many, many years. We helped them grow their businesses—not only the artists but the promoters as well.

I went out straight away on the Monday. We got the businesses together and said, “This is what we’re doing. I’m pretty confident Canberra’s going to have the 20 cap. We’re going to do this. Here’s the thing. Here’s a really generous offer.” And they went, “Oh, yeah, that sounds great.” I am hearing crickets at the moment. There are a few people in Canberra who are really actively trying to create some things but the Australian artists within New South Wales—people whose names you would know—are not coming. It is not enough money. Even though it is still a significant amount of money for any individual to drive to Canberra and play two 40-minute sets, they are thinking, “Well, we’re going to have a 100 cap soon,” and maybe they can get more money in that space.

That was not really where I saw this. I saw this as “We are in this together,” and that we would all dive in—that they would come and support us, the scene, because they all started playing bass guitar in their mum’s garage. You know: “We are all the same.” I am still waiting to hear. I was expecting to start to get some feedback, to be able to get some sort of information for a week now, when they have seen that the ACT has opened up. I am reticent to go back out and start pushing, but we shall see.

We have got some interesting things lined up. The challenge is that when you are pushing for a \$100 ticket you have to have an artist of some calibre so that you can say, “Look, we’re going to provide you with some drinks and food and you get to see this thing.” Glitoris sits in that space beautifully. They are really cool, and I am pretty confident that that show will sell out. But some of the other more local guys, like EYE band—no-one is paying 100 bucks for them.

THE CHAIR: With regard to the logistics of getting back and rebuilding, in terms of the easing of restrictions that have been announced, is that going to be more palatable for running a business or is it really more of the same?

Mr Fox: Do you mean just going to 20 in this moment?

THE CHAIR: Yes, and even what the trajectory looks like for the four square-metre rule.

Mr Fox: We have just taken a position that it is okay and that we are going to do the best we can. We know we have people who will come and support. We have a day-to-day trade of local people who come up and use it as their local watering hole. We have the ability to do some pool competitions. We have multiple rooms, so we can have a 20-person show on and still have 20 people playing pool or whatever in a space. So we are just in a holding pattern. It all helps. Any little bit of cash helps keep our most vulnerable people employed. The 100 cap will be interesting because we have some local shows, and we have several amazing Canberra artists who have come together and put some shows together. They are waiting for us to be able to announce that we can do that.

One hundred people in a room, having a couple of drinks, is an excellent experience and it is more than enough money for us to stay afloat. That is all that really matters there. As I said, we are in a holding pattern, and we are not really trying to push past what is reasonable. This whole thing is so important, and what the ACT has managed to do in this has just been brilliant. So I am really quite proud to be a part of that and just to hold and wait. We will just let people know that we are still there and we will be there for them in the future, and at some point in the next 12 months our business will be back on track and doing the great things we were doing before.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing today and giving a perspective of a local business that has offered so much and continues to offer a lot during this very difficult time. We certainly admire your resilience and your adaptation. You will be sent a copy of the transcript for this hearing. Please feel free to review that and make sure it is accurate. Let us know if it is not. Again, thank you for appearing.

Mr Fox: Thank you very much.

RATTENBURY, MR SHANE, Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability, Minister for Corrections and Justice Health, Minister for Justice, Consumer Affairs and Road Safety and Minister for Mental Health

JONASSON, MS KYLIE, Director-General, ACT Health Directorate

BRIGHTON, MS MEG, Deputy Director-General, Health Systems, Policy and Research, ACT Health Directorate

CULHANE, MR MICHAEL, Executive Group Manager, Policy, Partnerships and Programs, ACT Health Directorate

ORD, MR JON, Acting Executive Branch Manager, Mental Health Policy Unit, Policy, Partnerships and Programs, ACT Health Directorate

MOORE, DR ELIZABETH, Coordinator-General Mental Health, Office for Mental Health, ACT Health Directorate

RIORDAN, DR DENISE, Chief Psychiatrist, ACT Health Directorate

McDONALD, MS BERNADETTE, Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Health Services

PEFFER, MR DAVE, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Health Services

GRACE, MS KAREN, Executive Director, Mental Health, Justice Health and Alcohol and Drug Services, Canberra Health Services

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. As per usual, the privilege statement has been sent around. Could each person with you or on the line who intends to speak or is available to speak please indicate that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Ms Jonasson: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms McDonald: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Grace: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Ord: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Dr Moore: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Rattenbury: Just to start, I think Denise Riordan, the Chief Psychiatrist, should also be in the call.

THE CHAIR: I think she has just joined. Dr Riordan, would you please advise whether you are okay with the implications of the privilege statement?

Dr Riordan: I am absolutely fine with that, thank you for asking.

THE CHAIR: Mr Rattenbury, do you have an opening statement that you would like to give?

Mr Rattenbury: I will speak briefly because I will let the committee go where it wishes to, but what I can observe is that, obviously, the mental health implications of the pandemic are things that both this government and governments across the country have been very alive to. I am very pleased in some regards that there has been

quite a discussion about mental health during the pandemic. I think it is positive that there is both the discussion and the recognition of the mental health implications.

We have obviously made a number of responses. There have been both federal government funding packages as well as an ACT funding package when it comes to mental health, and we are happy to go to the details of that.

We have also experienced some demand pressure as a result of the COVID period and we are happy to go into the details and explain that later as well. But I think that is probably the sort of context to provide to get started.

MS CHEYNE: Thank you all for appearing today. My question is about the detail of how many people are, or do we sense are, accessing mental health services, from those low-level introductory services to those quite clinical services, for the first time over the last few months? And what proportion of these people are young people?

Mr Rattenbury: I think the answer to your question, as you probably anticipate, is that there is not a single answer to that. We have received a range of reports. Earlier this week I spoke in some detail with headspace, for example, and they said that they have had some young people disengage, but then other people have contacted them for the first time. I think that that has probably been the experience across most services—some people have not felt comfortable with telehealth provision. Others have found it actually a better way to communicate with services and have been very pleased to communicate in that way.

If I look across the mental health spectrum, including our non-government partners, the answer has been varied. Within Canberra Health Services we have seen probably an increase in presentations to the emergency department, in particular, and that has certainly resulted in around a 10 per cent increase in demand for acute mental health beds compared with the same period in the second half of last year. That sort of gives you a sense of it. Ms Grace, did you want to add any details to that?

Ms Grace: Yes. As the minister has stated, we have seen a 10 per cent increase in admissions across acute mental health services but, in particular, we have seen a 14 per cent increase in demand for high-dependency beds. We have seen an increase in presentations of people that are at the high end of being unwell, which is a significant increase on what we would ordinarily see.

In terms of your question about young people and first presentations, until we are able to analyse coded data—by that I mean data in relation to presentations following discharge where we are really clear about what the diagnosis was—it is hard to say for sure. We will not be able to really undertake that sort of analysis for another month or so.

But, anecdotally, what we have seen in terms of young people is not necessarily a rise in first presentations but a rise in existing clients of our service that have become more unwell. And part of that, as the minister has alluded to, seems to be related to disengagement with telehealth.

What we saw initially with young people was a good uptake of telehealth options, and

over the last month or so there has been a level of disengagement, with young people not answering the phone when their clinical managers are calling them. But, as I say, that is anecdotal.

We have seen an increase in adolescent admissions within the adolescent ward at the Canberra Hospital, the same as we have in the adult units. Anecdotally, again, from an adult perspective we are seeing the same mix of presentations but more of them and potentially a higher acuity—higher needs in that cohort that are presenting.

But, because it is still such early days, it is really hard to say categorically. A lot of the information at the moment is anecdotal and on the advice of the clinicians that are looking after these patients and what they are seeing in terms of trends.

MS CHEYNE: My understanding was that presentations to the emergency department were, by and large, down generally because people are not out and about, basically. Hearing the minister say that presentations to the emergency department for mental health reasons have increased, am I right to assume that mental health presentations to the ED really are quite significant over this period if overall presentations to the ED are down?

Ms McDonald: I can probably answer that. Overall, as the numbers of positive COVID-19 patients in the community went up, presentations to the emergency department started to decrease. We are not alone in that. That has been at both Calvary and Canberra Hospital and in other jurisdictions as well. I do need to say that our triage category 1 and 2 patients numbers did not decrease, so the sickest people who really required care were still coming to us. With the other categories we did see a decrease in presentation.

Having said that, we have seen those numbers start to come back up now. We are getting closer to our normal level of activity in our emergency department presentations—certainly not at a winter peak at this point in time. It will be interesting to see what happens with that.

We have seen the number of mental health presentations in recent weeks start to go up, but it is not really the number that is the issue; it is the acuity of those patients and the number of those patients that require admission from the emergency department into our acute units. We have seen an increase in those patients. There has also been an increase in the number of those patients, which maps to the acuity, that require our high dependency unit beds as well. But I am happy to let Ms Grace add to that if she needs to.

Ms Grace: No, I think that covers it.

MRS DUNNE: Could I seek some clarification, please, as to the current occupancy rate for the adult mental health unit and also for the, I think, two adolescent mental health beds? You said there has been an uptick in adolescent mental health admissions. Where are those young people going?

Ms Grace: I can speak to that. We are consistently running at full occupancy within both the high dependency and low dependency unit at the Canberra Hospital, with

similar levels across the inpatient units at Calvary hospital.

In terms of adolescents, we have seen an increase in admissions to the adolescent ward at the Canberra Hospital. We also do, on occasion, admit younger people to either the mental health short stay or the adult mental health unit, but that is dependent on clinical need and the individual presentation of the person.

At the moment we are certainly seeing an increase in the number of young people admitted into the adolescent ward. So that is not only into those two beds that you referred to, Mrs Dunne; that would also be into other beds within the adolescent mental health ward. That would be a decision that was made dependent on a clinical assessment of the young person and the appropriate place for that person to be admitted to.

MRS DUNNE: On notice, could the minister and officials provide the committee with some figures on the occupancy rate of the high and low dependency adult mental health units, the adolescent facilities and the wait times at the ED, and for the facilities at Calvary as well?

Mr Rattenbury: Yes. I should add at this point that, as part of our response during the COVID period to this increased demand, Canberra Health Services and ACT Health have worked with Calvary Public Hospital at Bruce, and we have opened up five additional mental health beds at Calvary hospital to provide additional capacity during this period.

MRS DUNNE: Where are those five mental health beds at Calvary? Where are they physically situated?

Mr Rattenbury: They are in the older persons mental health unit.

MRS DUNNE: And are they set aside for older people or are they just set aside for patients in general?

Ms Grace: I can clarify that. There is attached to the existing older persons mental health unit a six-bed HDU—high dependency/behavioural assessment area. Ordinarily, those beds are not used by Calvary unless they require to move somebody from older persons into one of those beds for behavioural management purposes. So those six beds were available for us to use through this period of increased demand.

MRS DUNNE: Have you opened up five or six beds?

Ms Grace: It is a six-bed area. One of those beds was already part of Calvary's complement of beds, and the additional five are the surge capacity.

MRS DUNNE: I am not familiar with the area. Are these essentially private rooms or is it a ward? Is it an optimal space for people with mental health issues?

Ms Grace: Yes, it is a designed space for mental health patients. It is single rooms, all the [*Interruption in sound recording*—] minimisation is in place and it has the required social space and outdoor space as well.

THE CHAIR: Can I confirm you have taken that question on notice?

Mr Rattenbury: Yes, that is fine.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering how mental health services have potentially changed in their service delivery during the COVID pandemic.

Ms Grace: I can address that question. Very early on in the pandemic the mental health service spent significant amounts of time considering their COVID-19 response. Initially, our fundamental principles throughout this pandemic have been to maintain as close to business as usual for as long as business as usual. They were the fundamental principles for our approach to planning.

We changed our services where we could not meet the requirements of physical distancing. So, for example, we have some group programs that we have not been able to hold face to face. Initially, we suspended some of those group programs, but over recent weeks we have been able to use telehealth solutions in order to continue with some of those groups virtually.

In terms of our face-to-face consultations, we did move some of those to telehealth. We have not stopped any services other than that. We have had to put restrictions on visitation, as is the case across the whole of the health system. And we have also put leave restrictions into our inpatient unit for the same reason.

But, otherwise, as far as possible, we have maintained our services. The other area where there has been an impact has been on our inpatient rehabilitation program at UCH. The reason for that is that there are fundamental components that are reliant on group activities and activities such as cooking meals. They have been difficult to do within the restrictions, so there has been an impact on our rehabilitation program to some extent through this.

MR PETTERSSON: With regard to those group settings or the other services that you have tried to take to telehealth or online, have you been measuring attendance or participation and comparing it to when the previous in-person services were available?

Ms Grace: Yes. We collect activity data on all our contacts; so we will be able to analyse that data. We have not analysed it at this point. We are heading towards the end of May, so that will give us two months of data since we implemented our COVID-19 response. So we will be able to see some of that.

What we have seen, and what we have looked at so far, is that there was an initial dip in March followed by a peak, and that peak was where we first implemented our plan. Part of the plan was to actually make contact with everybody that was currently clinically managed across our whole service breadth, in order to check in with everybody and ensure that there was a plan in place for every one of those individuals. So you can see that spike in terms of activity. Since then it has sort of come back down and has remained stable, but we will be doing further analysis on that and, in particular, on groups.

Dr Moore: If I could just add to that in terms of the mental health community support programs run through our non-government sector, they similarly had to make a change to offering non face-to-face support. Through the peak organisations, many of them experienced some difficulty initially doing that, and obviously that was on a range of what was actually required. Some still maintained face-to-face contact. But, generally speaking, the experience, once people got used to it, was reasonable.

Carers certainly had some difficulties and we worked with Carers ACT to try and ensure that there was support for carers during that time. Jon might want to add something to that.

Mr Ord: Just to support Dr Moore's comments [*Interruption in sound recording—*] in terms of the agencies that we contacted, they responded very quickly. Although, to reflect the minister's earlier comments, there were some people who were less keen on telehealth, there were some people who it worked very well for. As Ms Grace alluded to earlier, we are obviously in the process of going through conversations with NGOs now in terms of how they were finding it in the last couple of weeks. So there is some future analysis to be done there about lessons being learned.

THE CHAIR: Minister, can you please advise what data sources and what information you have about tracking the number of people who have committed suicide?

Mr Rattenbury: I will ask Dr Moore to speak to that one.

Dr Moore: Suicide itself is a very complex issue, and the actual pronouncement of death by suicide is actually through the coronial court. Having said that, we do keep quite close contact with Lifeline, and with other areas where there may be potential suicides, so that appropriate support can be offered in that area.

The ACT government has, of course, invested in LifeSpan, which is a nine-strategy suicide prevention program that has been going since 2018. Part of that is actually around involving the community in promotion/prevention and in suicide prevention. Of course, the ACT government also procures from the Way Back Support Service, which is a post-vention service, and I think others can speak more about that.

THE CHAIR: But specifically on the data, do you get any information from the police who, I imagine, often are the first responders to scenes where people have committed suicide? Do you get that more immediate information such that you are able to track unconfirmed or suspected suicides?

Dr Moore: I will leave it to Dr Riordan.

Dr Riordan: Thank you for your question. Yes, there are always reports made in relation to any consumer of mental health services. So anybody who is in mental health services—if they are found by the police in relation to an adverse event where suicide is suspected, then there is a report made through in relation to that presentation and the mental health, justice health and alcohol and drug services morbidity and mortality committee will automatically start to review that person's journey through

the health system.

So that is prior to any of the coronial investigations. That happens very promptly after an event is sort of brought to the attention of the services. Of course, for people who do not have a contact with the health services, the public health system, then we would not be able to carry out such a review.

THE CHAIR: Do you, tragically, tally the number of suspected suicides? Do you actually aggregate that data or is it simply on a case-by-case basis?

Dr Riordan: The morbidity and mortality committee kind of tabulates each month the number of new referrals that come into the committee, so into that process, and the groupings within that. So we do keep numbers on those referrals on a month-by-month basis.

THE CHAIR: And, generally speaking, what percentage of suicides, as confirmed by the coroner, have had an engagement with health services such that they were referred to that mortality committee?

Dr Riordan: That is an answer that I cannot give you at this point in time. I think it is something we would be happy to take on notice, but I do not have those figures to hand at the moment.

THE CHAIR: If you could please take on notice the actual or approximate percentage of people confirmed to have committed suicide by the coroner that have been referred to the mortality committee and also a monthly or quarterly breakdown of the number of people that have been confirmed by the coroner to have committed suicide over the last five years and also the number of referrals to the mortality committee by month or by quarter—I think especially by month would be useful for this current period in particular—again over the last five years so that we have got some trend data to look at.

Dr Riordan: Absolutely. Can I just clarify, though, that, of course, the confirmation of any deaths over the last 12 months that may have been referred as a suspected suicide obviously will not have been formally determined as a suicide yet by the coroner.

THE CHAIR: That is why I am asking for both datasets: from the mortality committee and the coroner's findings.

MS CHEYNE: My question is about the presentations—and if we do not have this data and I am asking the wrong people, just tell me—to the emergency department that might not, on the face of it, seem to necessarily be linked to mental health but might be a sign or a signal towards it, such as people presenting for, you know, alcohol abuse or drug abuse, whether that has increased at all over the last little while?

Ms Grace: I can probably address that question in part. It is difficult to give exact numbers in terms of those sorts of presenting problems because it depends on what is recorded as the presenting problem when the person leaves the emergency department. So what the diagnosis is, for an ED presentation, is quite tricky.

However, what I can tell you is what we have seen, in terms of our increases in presentations for mental health services, is that there have been a significant proportion of those patients that have comorbid drug and alcohol use issues as well. So it certainly seems to us to be part of the trend, in that what we are seeing in relation to this is a combination of mental illness and substance use disorder.

MS CHEYNE: I appreciate that there are ways in which people can kind of self-medicate that are healthier, like keeping to a routine and things like that, but is there advice for people that doesn't tell them how to suck eggs, about how they can be trying to better manage a condition rather than turning to substances, and is that issued in any sort of systemic way?

Mr Rattenbury: Yes. Since the beginning of the pandemic we very early recognised that this was going to be an issue. It has been observed before, and there was a clear understanding. So, right from the beginning, the ACT government messaging has carried a lot of the pointers you are referring to. Through a range of government communication channels the messaging has been to get regular exercise, limit the amount of drug and alcohol intake, keep to a routine, get a decent amount of sleep.

All of the sorts of general tips that help people maintain wellbeing have been a common and frequent part of government communications, and through a range of channels, whether it is the main government channel that has been available on the ACT Health website. Since the COVID-specific website has been up and running in the ACT, that information has been quite prominent on that website. So that general information has been available quite prominently, recognising the sorts of trends that Ms Grace was just talking about.

MS LE COUTEUR: Can you talk a bit more about the impact on the average ACT Australian person. We are doing social distancing and, really, we are making a huge change in our social life. You said that there has been some information put out via government channels, but what impact has that had on the majority of us?

Mr Rattenbury: Dr Moore, I am looking at you as probably our best start on this.

Dr Moore: There have actually been quite a number of research projects going on that have shown that there has been an increase in anxiety and depression across the population, specifically in the 15 to 24-year-olds, which is not to be unexpected because they have been the ones that have been impacted by unemployment much more than the rest of the population.

There has also been a suggestion that there has been some increase in anxiety and depressive features also in more elderly populations, and this brings to light the need for all that social connectedness, the kindness and the self-kindness as well in terms of self-regulation.

That seemed to increase in the period March-April. There is ongoing research which is happening through ANU which is tracking whether or not the changes that we have made, in terms of the reduction in restrictions, children going back to school, have actually made a difference. But we will not know that for at least another month. They

need to analyse the data. One of the other things that we are looking at doing in terms of further research is actually looking at tracking that on an ongoing basis.

MS LE COUTEUR: You talked about kindness being important. What has been the impact, that any of you are aware of, of the various new mutual aid groups that have come up?

Dr Moore: There is no research around that. The anecdotal evidence is that the more connected you are with people of your own ilk—I am thinking here that there is now a plethora of online yoga groups, so people are getting together more in social groups on Facebook. There is anecdotal evidence that that allows you to be much stronger in your personal resilience, and that will be further researched.

MS LE COUTEUR: That is a positive mark for Facebook. I just heard it from a psychiatrist.

Dr Moore: Yes, but it is the type of Facebook account. You are looking at a person that does not actually have a Facebook account, but what I have taken from people is that you need to be very careful in the Facebook accounts that you use. We have found evidence—we have put out evidence—that, actually, over-involvement in social media is not good for you and listening to really accurate evidence is what you need. However, there are some good uses of Facebook. I am not so sure about Twitter.

MS LE COUTEUR: [*Interruption in sound recording*] on that point. I do not think you can top that one.

Dr Moore: No. It is a tool, and all tools can be sharp and used against you, but if you use a tool appropriately, it can be a very effective tool.

MRS DUNNE: I would like to get a feeling for where mental health in the ACT has created its own new programs in response to COVID and how it sees those programs evolving as we start to emerge from the lockdown phase.

Mr Rattenbury: I think it would be fair to say that we have not sought to create new programs at this time, partly because of the speed with which the adjustments were made for the pandemic. That is certainly the focus of both existing efforts, but then the additional money that is going to be put in through the mental health support package is really targeted towards organisations, both internally and externally, that are already operating, to enable them to either adjust their program delivery or to increase that capacity or to simply deal with the additional pressures coming on.

I am happy to go into some of the details of the package, if you like. However, we are also cognisant that, as has been the nature of the discussion today, there are new issues emerging and there may be new ideas on how to deal with it. One of the features of the funding package that we put together was an allocation of \$400,000—sorry, \$450,000—essentially unallocated, to leave some space either for things that needed to be funded that we had not perceived coming through or for organisations to come forward with new propositions as particular COVID-related problems are identified.

MRS DUNNE: Could you, perhaps on notice, minister, give the committee a breakdown on the COVID-specific funding that has been rolled out through the hospital and mental health services that are run directly by the government, and money that has been given to the community sector. Also, in relation to that \$450,000 unallocated, have you had to call on that money since it was appropriated?

Mr Rattenbury: Yes. The breakdown is spelled out in the press release. We will provide that to you on notice, but it is spelled out line by line where the money is going, by name of organisation or program. In terms of the innovation fund, as I will call it, Dr Moore is in charge of that and she can speak to your second question right now if you like.

Dr Moore: We have just put together the criteria for accessing the fund and we hope to have that to the minister for his advice by Tuesday, Monday being a public holiday.

MRS DUNNE: At this stage there has been no direct call on that money?

Dr Moore: No.

MRS DUNNE: Are you going to be out seeking to spend that money or are you going to wait for people to knock on your door?

Dr Moore: No, we will be advertising that the grants are available. However, I am very keen to make sure that we do not allocate it all at once, given that we know that COVID will continue for some time, and when we see what is happening over the next few months.

MRS DUNNE: This is, in a sense, a way of measuring unmet demand in the community that is related to COVID?

Dr Moore: Or a change in demand because, as you know, JobSeeker may revert to Newstart. This may call on a whole new different area that we need to explore. The social and economic impacts over the next few months may be very pertinent to changes in mental health and alcohol and drug use.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you, chair.

THE CHAIR: Minister, what additional call on resources has there been from school-aged people over the last couple of months?

Mr Rattenbury: Dr Moore, you might again help us start there, thanks.

Dr Moore: I will probably have to take that question on notice. Certainly we have put a lot of effort into ensuring that there are resources on the health website to help parents talk to their children both around COVID and around managing anxiety. The resources also include how to manage those dual or maybe triple roles that people have had to take on in terms of working, being a parent at home and supervising children at home during their schooling.

THE CHAIR: Specifically, have there actually been additional resources required

from the government or other service providers?

Mr Rattenbury: I think it is important here to put 2020 in context as well because we started the year with the bushfire and smoke issue. And there was close work between the health services and the Education Directorate to actually prepare for children coming back at the beginning of the year. We were very conscious that some children would have been at the coast and potentially been involved in some quite stressful situations. The smoke was obviously quite oppressive for them over the summer, and so there had been quite a lot of preparation at the start of the year to give teachers the skills to identify children presenting with those—I do not want to say trauma issues—sorts of pressures on them at the start of the year. So there had been some extra energy put into that.

And the initial reports we had were that that worked quite well. Then, of course, COVID has come through. I think, again, that there has been a close eye on children coming back to school, looking at how they have gone during the period they have been at home and how they are going with adjusting to coming back to school. So that is probably where the emphasis has been in terms of the schools.

Then, of course, there is all the capability the Education Directorate has through its own school psychologists and others, which we are probably less well placed to give you the details on.

THE CHAIR: I understand that context and I appreciate it. But I am still curious about the increase in demand for mental health support for kids over the last couple of months. Is there anything noticeable that you have detected?

Mr Rattenbury: Again, I can provide you with the feedback I have had through conversations with our NGO partners. Mental Illness Education ACT, which is one of our partners who provide programs in schools, received requests from schools to do online work during the period that students were learning remotely, and so they have had to sort of change their service delivery.

Menslink, who, of course, target young men, gave us feedback that they had some initial reluctance. Some young people did not want to have a telephone or online consultation because they felt, perhaps, there was a lack of privacy in the home. And so they adjusted their model to make sure that they could—they, for example, invited young people to go for a walk with the counsellor so that they could do it physically distanced but having face-to-face consultation.

I spoke earlier about headspace. That is probably the sort of feedback we have at this point in time.

THE CHAIR: Is there any plan to collate evidence or data about the mental health impact of 2020 or as it relates to kids?

Dr Moore: Yes, there will be research undertaken. There is already research through the ANU around the social impacts of mental health during COVID. And the uni of New South Wales is doing one, which I will have to get the title of, but it is basically the impacts of COVID from womb to tomb, so that is taking a longitudinal approach

to those impacts.

We also have, through LifeSpan, a schools working group and that is part of getting together with different schools. We have the youth aware of mental health program that was started at the beginning of the year. This is a resilience program for year 9s that, unfortunately, was partially disrupted because of COVID, but we have had schools wanting to come back very early. We were going to not do any schools in term 2, but two schools are resuming in term 2. So, obviously, they see the need there to support their young people through that.

The other thing that we are doing is actually looking at resilience programs for the 12-year-olds, 8 to 12-year-olds. We are doing a piece of work there to see what we can best do to guide the education department in, again, boosting resilience early for our kids. They have been through a heck of a lot but they actually, generally speaking, if there are no other vulnerabilities, take on very well the programs around recipients and wanting to gain the mastery.

MS CHEYNE: I think my question might be more directed to the Chief Psychiatrist. I am curious about the appointment of the deputy medical officer for mental health in the commonwealth. Is it Dr Vine? How is she engaging with states and territories, if at all? It sounds like an excellent appointment and well needed and has been called for forever, so good, but what difference is it going to make for us in the ACT and are you in regular contact with her?

Dr Riordan: Thank you for that question. I have to say that it was a piece of great news to hear not only that there had been a deputy officer appointed for mental health but also that it was Dr Ruth Vine, who is a highly regarded psychiatrist across Australia. She has previously been a chief psychiatrist in Victoria. She has also worked as a director of large public health services. She is very experienced in and committed to public health, mental health services. I think she comes with a really strong record and credibility.

She has only just been appointed and so I have not actually been in touch with her yet. I thought that I would leave that until next week. I notice that she is taking part in a webinar that the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists is providing for fellows on Tuesday evening, and next week, talking about some of that work that she is going to be doing. I think that it is going to be really important to find out from her how she sees her role and then to be making the contacts with her about how that will affect us here, and impact and enable us here in the ACT.

There has been a group, as you are probably aware, of ministers of mental health meeting to look at the national mental health response; and I would have every confidence that Ruth Vine would be able to really work very well in that space and alongside the CEO for the National Mental Health Commission, Christine Morgan, to work to get a plan that continues to see how we progress from where we are now and that it is something that absolutely meets the needs of all Australians, including, obviously, those who, perhaps, have that more severe end of mental illness. Because what we do know is that those are people who have significant struggles and challenges anyway, and whenever there is a kind of national adversity they are people who already go into those situations with a lot of disadvantage and they are at risk of

becoming increasingly disadvantaged. So I think it is going to be really important to ensure that all the needs of all Australians, and particularly that very vulnerable group from the mental health perspective, are supported.

Mr Rattenbury: I might just add to that. Dr Riordan referred to the mental health ministers getting together. This has actually been the first time that there has been a dedicated meeting of mental health ministers in Australia. Not all jurisdictions have a specific mental health minister. It is something we have been trying to pull together for some time, and the pandemic has really accelerated that. I think it is a very positive thing to have that network building up. It speaks to that broader, I guess, understanding and recognition of the need for a more dedicated focus on mental health issues.

MS LE COUTEUR: Dr Riordan and Dr Moore, you both touched on people having more problems if they had other vulnerabilities. I suppose I am particularly interested in the young people that Dr Moore was talking about. What are we doing for our young people, those who are not resilient, those who, as you say, are resilient if they do not have other vulnerability?

Dr Riordan: Just for the sake of open disclosure, some people may be aware that I am also a child and adolescent psychiatrist, so your question is something that absolutely speaks to a passion.

I think that what we have been doing in child and adolescent mental health services is working increasingly towards looking at that sort of very early intervention and prevention and so, really, over the last number of years there has been a growth of the perinatal health service, and that works a lot with, obviously, parents and young infants.

We have also developed some of the programs that work into the child and family centres to work, again, with those families who might be experiencing more vulnerabilities, to give mental health support in the places that they are accessing on a regular basis and to do that by way of working very much around that parent-child interaction and relationship, and looking to put in early programs such as circles of security, attachment work to really try and build up, from as young an age as possible, that resilience in children and young people.

I think the next stage of the intervention that we have provided is that there are now some school-based programs for different primary school groups and, again, those programs are targeting those children who, perhaps, are identified early in school as having some of the more challenging behaviours. We know that that is important because those challenging behaviours in school settings are often also present in the home setting and, again, if left unaddressed, they are likely to become more significant.

So I think the services across the board are trying to work much more intensively in that early intervention space. Also, I think one of the challenges for children and young people at the moment has been their lack of social connectedness with the activities and out of school activities that they would normally have. I think that we are, hopefully, going to see those activities start to pick up and to have ways of

delivering those activities for children and young people that still maintain the need for social distancing.

I think, again anecdotally, I have certainly noticed a lot more children and young people out with families in nature parks and places. I think that that has been one of the things that have been promoted a lot through the websites from Health and a variety of other places—you know, taking that opportunity to go out and exercise. I have certainly witnessed a lot of that, again anecdotally, happening here in Canberra.

I think the way forward is certainly to support parents to have the skills that they need to manage with the adversities that we are currently facing and to put in a range of different strategies for children and young people. The current services have, as has already been mentioned, been a little bit surprised, perhaps, that young people were not as keen to engage using technology as we might have predicted. But, obviously, for some young people, for those that have chosen to engage in that way and want to continue to do that, we will do that. But I know that the current services are very keen and currently working quite hard to start to be able to offer much more by way of face-to-face services.

MS LE COUTEUR: [*Interruption in sound recording—*] and CYPS system? Are we getting to that level in terms of issues for some young people?

Dr Riordan: I am sorry, I am not aware of any of that information. I am not aware of the number of referrals that they have had, so I cannot help you with that, I am sorry.

MS LE COUTEUR: Yes, okay. Fair enough; you are in another bit of the system, really.

Dr Riordan: That is right. Nationally, I think, and again here in the ACT, we have been very aware of the impact that social isolation may have, particularly if there are sort of tense and fraught relationships in homes; and so, you know, there has been a real awareness about the risk of the increase in domestic violence and things. But, yes, that is not data that would come directly into Health.

MRS DUNNE: This is probably a question for Dr Riordan and Dr Moore. What do you expect would be the ongoing mental health issues as we emerge out of the lockdown phase and into a slightly more sociable phase, and in a number of categories: for the people who are already known to the mental health system, for young people in general but also for people who may come into contact with the mental health system for the first time during this crisis?

Dr Riordan: Elizabeth, you go first this time.

Dr Moore: We have some data from previous experience, not in the ACT but generally, where there has been adversity in times of transition. You are more at risk at transition times; for instance, losing your job or going back to school or leaving school again. So it really depends on what happens with the trajectory of the COVID pandemic. For instance, if we now do not have a second wave, if we do not have to go back into lockdown, we could expect people to normalise their behaviours, and then we will just have to look out for the social and economic impacts.

If we are unfortunate and there is a second wave of COVID and we have to go back into social isolation in a more formalised manner then we could expect there to be an increase in anxiety again and, once again, young people may be more adversely affected by that because there will be economic impacts secondary to that.

So at the moment it is a little bit of a movable feast. As with the mobile hospital on Garran Oval, we will prepare for the worst whilst hopefully not experiencing the worst. That is where all of those resilience programs come in. That is where all of the work from our children and young person review comes in: looking at actually how we can connect people up together, how we can support community services to do what they are doing in terms of making sure that that connectedness remains and looking to the commonwealth to ensure that there is a level of economic stability there.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Is that answer concluded?

Dr Moore: Yes.

MRS DUNNE: Does Dr Riordan have anything to add to that?

Dr Riordan: Possibly the only other thing I might add—thank you for the question—is that I think if we do have to tolerate a second wave people will have a greater level of preparedness for it. I would hope that, maybe, as a society, as a community, we are perhaps more attuned to what we need to do to look after ourselves and look after those around us during what would, again, become a period of uncertainty.

THE CHAIR: That is all we have time for today. Thank you very much, minister and all the ACT government officials, for joining us today. There are a few questions that have been taken on notice. Of course, if there are any other updates that you think are relevant for the committee, please do send through any information. As per usual, a transcript will be prepared and it will be sent through. Please check that for accuracy. That concludes this afternoon's hearing. Thank you.

Mr Rattenbury: Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 4.31 pm.