



**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, 11 JUNE 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 10.04 am.

GENTLEMAN, MR MICK, Minister for Advanced Technology and Space Industries, Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Minister for Planning and Land Management, Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Minister for Urban Renewal

PONTON, MR BEN, Director-General, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

BRADY, DR ERIN, Deputy Director-General, Land Strategy and Environment, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

RUTLEDGE, MR GEOFFREY, Deputy Director-General, Sustainability and the Built Environment, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

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CILLIERS, MR GEORGE, Director, Development Assessment, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

WALKER, MR IAN, Executive Group Manager, Environment, Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

FOLEY, MR JUSTIN, Executive Branch Manager, ACT Parks and Conservation, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

THE CHAIR: Hello, Minister Gentleman. Welcome to you and your officials to this public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. As usual, this is being recorded and broadcast and webstreamed for transcription purposes, as well as for people to be able to view the proceedings today. A copy of the privilege statement has been sent to all your officials. I ask that they individually say their names and state whether they understand the privilege implications of that document.

Mr Gentleman: Thank you, chair. I understand the implications.

Mr Ponton: I also understand the privilege statement, thank you.

Dr Brady: I also understand the privilege statement.

Mr Cilliers: I understand the privilege statement.

Mr Rutledge: I understand the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: And Mr Walker?

Mr Walker: Yes, I understand the privilege statement.

Mr Foley: I understand the privileges statement. Can you hear me?

THE CHAIR: Yes, thank you very much, Mr Foley. If we have missed anyone, before chiming in for the first time, please give us that assurance. Minister, before we go to questions, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to give?

Mr Gentleman: Chair, yes, I do. I might just kick off with that. I thank the committee, first of all, for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is important, of course, to look at the government's response to the COVID-19 health emergency, and I would like to begin by informing the committee of the important work being undertaken by the government across the areas of planning, development and land management to contribute to the territory's economic resilience.

In relation to the planning matters, the ACT government recognises the importance of the building and construction sector in our community, including the wellbeing of those employed in the sector and their families. The building and construction sectors are key to the survival of many local businesses and our long-term economic recovery. To support the economic resilience of these sectors, and to guarantee that projects continue in the development pipeline, the government has stepped up its efforts in many areas to make sure that new work can commence, that the economy is resilient and that Canberrans remain employed.

We recognise that this needs to be done in a way that still provides for high-quality design and built outcomes, and also recognises that the community continues to play an important role in providing valuable comments through the development assessment process. So it is not about fast-tracking at any cost but, rather, making sure that we are able to be as efficient as we possibly can in order to allow good quality projects to progress as quickly as possible. I have participated in virtual meetings over the past months with my colleagues, the planning ministers across the country. We have agreed to a set of COVID principles that reinforce our planning systems and development approvals pipeline in Australia. That must continue to function during the COVID-19 crisis so that jobs and businesses can be maintained in this critical time and so that the system supports economic recovery.

Ministers were very clear, though, that the current public health emergency is not an opportunity to remove community safeguards when it comes to planning and decision-making in the public interest. It is paramount in all planning systems, and this must continue as a guiding consideration. To assist shovel-ready projects to progress to the construction phase, the planning and land authority is continuing to provide services to the building and construction sector, including the assessment of development applications, design review and other planning applications, and has made the transition to providing these services electronically very smoothly.

I think we are the most progressive jurisdiction when it comes to moving to the digital age. Compared to some other jurisdictions, we are well placed to continue servicing the sector in the changed work environment. In fact, it has been commented on at the planning ministers MINCO that the ACT is doing well. I must say, also, that at the industry ministers ministerial council meeting the comment was made that the ACT has the best planning system in Australia.

Some of those changes include the online lodgement of development applications and electronic public notification, inspection of documents and receiving documents. The operation of the National Capital Design Review Panel has transitioned to being fully online, with several successful design review sessions having taken place recently. Service levels have been unaffected despite the transition of the authority's workforce to remote working arrangements. I am pleased with the recent performance of the

authority, especially since the ACT government provided funding for six new assessment officers to assist in reducing the backlog in processing development applications. The authority has seen a number of active DAs reduced to a low of 176 in May this year, down from 371 in July 2019, with the number lodged each week remaining relatively steady week on week this year. We have seen an increased number of DAs coming in most recently.

There are positive signs for the sector and the economy. We have seen a 15 per cent increase in DAs lodged from January to May this year when compared to the same period last year. I think it is a really important message to the Canberra community that the industry sees what the government is doing, particularly the planning group working hard to include the construction industry in their thoughts. I might leave it there for the moment. I am happy to take questions from the chair.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, minister. If you are able to flick your camera on, as it was before, that would help with the interactions slightly.

Mr Gentleman: Sure.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Minister, you made mention of development applications. But what about some of the other approvals that are required, such as unit titling and certificates of occupancy? How many of those are pending at the moment?

Mr Gentleman: I might ask directorate officials to give you that detailed information, chair. I will pass over to the team.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, and you might have to mute your microphone, minister. Thanks.

Mr Ponton: I will ask Mr Phillips, and possibly Mr Cilliers also, to talk about this. In terms of those other approvals, we recognised very early on that unit title applications were going to be critical. It is at that stage in a project when there is peak debt in terms of a developer's need to obtain settlements as quickly as possible. So, having already invested the additional six officers in the development assessment team through the budget last year, we looked to redeploy two additional officers into that team and also redeploy a further two officers into the unit titles team. We have also looked, on a risk basis, at the way that we conduct our inspections and finalise those matters, and that has allowed us to speed up that process with an appropriate consideration of risk.

That has meant that we have been able to work through the applications. I do not have the exact number; Mr Cilliers or Mr Phillips may have the exact number, but I think it is a handful of outstanding applications at this point in time. We are working through those as quickly as we can, but, as I said, we are talking about a very small number—literally a handful. I might refer to Mr Phillips.

Mr Phillips: There are some historic unit title applications that have been outstanding for many years because the application has been lodged but not progressed. At the present time there are currently 32 applications outstanding. All of the applications that are being received, however, are being processed within 15 business days—that is

our current standard—and all of the applications that have come in over the last five or six months have been processed within those periods of time.

THE CHAIR: Did you say unit titles or certificates of occupancy?

Mr Phillips: Unit titles.

THE CHAIR: So all unit title applications in the last six months have been resolved within 15 days?

Mr Phillips: Yes. That is what we aim to do; that is our standard. So those applications that are currently coming in are being processed. There are inspections that are still being undertaken, and they are still going out.

THE CHAIR: Okay; all in 15 days. Good to hear. With regard to certificates of occupancy, where are things at?

Mr Phillips: Those certificates of occupancy are issued by a certifier at the effective completion of the building. Those are matters for the Access Canberra building regulator. So I do not have those figures on me at the present time.

THE CHAIR: Right, but you are responsible for the policy, are you not?

Mr Phillips: Yes, we are.

THE CHAIR: So where are things at? If you are responsible for the policy, surely you must get reports; you must have information about that.

Mr Ponton: I might just jump in here. In terms of certificates of occupancy, as Mr Phillips said, that is a matter for Access Canberra. In terms of policy, we are responsible for building policy, but in terms of the administration of the building system that is entirely Access Canberra, so that is not a matter that we can reasonably respond to.

THE CHAIR: Right. You spoke about peak debt earlier. Peak debt is not alleviated until settlements occur and settlements do not occur until certificates of occupancy are issued. So if you are going to make that comment about peak debt, surely it is in your remit to know what hold-ups there are with regard to certificates of occupancy.

Mr Ponton: The certificate of occupancy, chair, is at the very end of the process. So that is after we have dealt with—

THE CHAIR: Peak debt, yes.

Mr Ponton: Yes. It comes after we have issued what we need to issue in terms of the unit titles plan. The private certifier, essentially, completes all of the paperwork and submits that to Access Canberra. Access Canberra then issues the certificate of occupancy. So, as I said, it does not have anything to do with the planning and land authority. In terms of policy aspect, it is building policy—how you build the building—but issuing of the certificate of occupancy is not a matter for the planning

and land authority. That question would be best directed towards our colleagues in Access Canberra.

THE CHAIR: So you do not know how long it is taking for a certificate of occupancy to be issued after the paperwork is submitted to Access Canberra?

Mr Ponton: No, I do not have that information.

THE CHAIR: Is that not fundamental information for the planning minister?

Mr Ponton: That would be for the building minister, not for the planning minister. I do not know whether the minister would like to comment on that. In terms of the roles and responsibilities of the planning and land authority, that is the last step, and it is a building matter, not a matter, certainly from the directorate's perspective, within my portfolio responsibilities.

THE CHAIR: Minister, do you have anything to add?

Mr Gentleman: Chair, if there are any questions that are related to what you have just asked, I am happy to take those on notice and we can ask the relevant portfolios for the answers for you.

THE CHAIR: Thanks, minister, I would appreciate that. We might flick through that on email as a question on notice.

Mr Gentleman: Sure.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

MS CHEYNE: Thank you. My question takes us back to the start of the development process. Minister, in your opening remarks you said that there has been an increase in the number of development applications that have been received. I appreciate that the directorate has been working on processing these as quickly as possible while keeping a firm eye on the detail. Are you able to give a bit of a picture of what the sector is looking like from a government perspective? I think many people would be thinking that the construction industry would be slowing, so with respect to the fact that there has been an increase in the number of DAs, I am keen to know what you would attribute that to and whether there are enough resources at the moment to keep that pipeline progressing.

Mr Gentleman: Yes. We have seen the statistical evidence of the number of DAs increasing. We have had 1,751 lodged with the authority so far this financial year. This includes 846 DAs, 206 amendment applications and 699 exemption declarations for minor or single-dwelling applications. That is a 15 per cent increase in DAs lodged from the start—January to May—compared to last year, which I think is a really good sign that the economy of the ACT and the building sector are going reasonably well. Of course, it does have its challenges. I think social distancing is a real concern for the safety of those particular construction workers, but my understanding is that the industry sees that as an important part of how they do work across the ACT. They want to continue to do that important work to ensure our

economy does grow in Canberra.

We do see a slowing, though, with the announcement from Barry Morris Property Group that its larger construction project right here in the city has been slowed. That was not due to the industry; it was due, I understand, to the impacts of COVID and the impacts of the numbers of foreign students. The numbers of students who were going to come and live in the ACT and purchase in those areas has dropped due to restrictions on migration because of COVID, and the group only received somewhere near 130 pre-sales for that particular project. I would say that Barry Morris has done a good job in advising purchasers that there will be another opportunity for them and that he will look at other opportunities on that site. Of course, that would mean different development applications and a different project, but we have not seen what that could be yet.

I certainly hope that we do not see that happen more frequently across the ACT, but we will see, we believe, a reduction in the number of construction jobs in the ACT as purchasers wane in the future. That is a concern for the government and the community, so we need to try to do our best to promote jobs across the ACT. In the short term, certainly, you have seen some strategic initiatives by government to invest in short-term job applications and opportunities. I have done it within my directorate, particularly in the environment sector within parks and conservation. It was taken up well by those employees who had been affected by COVID and its impact across the ACT. So whilst we are seeing more come in at the moment, we may not be able to keep up that steady stream as the industry goes forward.

MS CHEYNE: Are there any further measures for efficiency within the government processes that the directorate is looking at to continue to give industry confidence that when they submit something it will receive priority?

Mr Gentleman: Certainly within the planning directorate we have gained efficiencies since people have been working remotely and digitally. Those have been incredibly effective. As I have mentioned recently, the number of DAs decided is much higher than before. The number that are sitting in the pipeline is lower. We are deciding more DAs than are coming in, which is a first, I think, for quite a while. That does go to show the efficiency. Across government we are seeing it as well. In other directorates we are seeing incredible gains in efficiency by those who are able to work remotely and do not need to travel into the workplace. That will, we hope, stay.

I have talked to my directorate, and even my office staff, about the opportunity of working from home more frequently, even after COVID is completed. So I think there are good opportunities for us to learn very much from what has occurred and how we have been able to adapt to become more efficient.

MS CHEYNE: Just to clarify, do you attribute the efficiency in approving those development applications to people being able to focus more on the work from home or travel less, or are there other reasons that the efficiencies have been gained?

Mr Gentleman: That is part of it. But we also, of course, invested in six new officers for the directorate so that they could get on top of the DA backlog. That was an important investment. We could look at further investments in a similar vein.

I understand that other directorates are also looking to see where they can provide efficiencies so that we can get approvals done quicker and industry can get onto the job cycle quicker.

MRS DUNNE: I just wanted to follow up on this. I think it is quite laudable, minister, that we are ploughing through the DAs at a much faster rate and within the time frames et cetera, but why did we have to have a COVID crisis before we did this? Why could we have not done this years ago?

Mr Gentleman: That is not the case, Mrs Dunne. As I mentioned, we went through a budget process prior to COVID and acquired more staff, acknowledging that DA decision-making had slowed. A number of DAs now are much more complex than we have ever had before; that is an important thing to understand as well. And we have, of course, looked at other opportunities to make DA approvals more efficient. The National Capital Design Review Panel assists there. We can go through a design review and look at what impediments there are or what changes might need to occur for proponents before it gets to the decision stage so that they are well aware of what can occur if they are to amend their proposals in advance—pre-DA, if you like.

MRS DUNNE: But the point you have made, Mr Gentleman, is that in this COVID environment you have been ploughing through the DAs in a way that we had not before. Yes, you have extra staff, but suddenly in the COVID environment your staff in the agency are becoming much more efficient. Apart from extra staff, what has fundamentally changed that suddenly we are ploughing through the DAs, where there has been constant complaint for as long as I can remember about the slowness of DAs?

Mr Gentleman: No, that is incorrect. We were already becoming much more efficient, of course, in working with our DAs. We have gained efficiencies over time. What I said was that all government directorates are telling me that they are more efficient through this COVID process. We have seen efficiency gains in many directorates across the ACT, not just in the planning directorate. We have seen some efficiencies through remote work, which has seen better time lines on the DA process.

MRS DUNNE: Thanks, minister.

MS LE COUTEUR: I have a supplementary question, to start off, on the more efficient processing of DAs. The Chief Minister made an announcement last month that the ACT was going to make it easier to process DAs. From what you are saying, the only real ease has been that there is additional staff and that they are working more efficiently. Is that the case or are there other changes envisaged in the DA processing system?

Mr Gentleman: I have Geoffrey Rutledge here to talk to you about some of the work that he has been doing within the DA processes.

Mr Rutledge: Thanks, minister, and thanks, Ms Le Couteur, for the question. As I have said to this committee probably over the last 12 to 18 months, we moved to a staged assessment of DAs—which was part efficiency, part integrity—to get that in line. We did say that we thought we probably needed additional resources, and the

government gave us those additional resources. Once COVID struck, we had to put in a continuity plan that envisaged up to 30 per cent of our workforce absent at any one time, and we had to work remotely. We effectively evacuated the building towards the end of March. We had our six new starters already on and we moved some additional staff from other areas within the directorate, getting us to a total of 10 additional staff working on DA assessments.

Again, we did that when we were pre-empting an absentee rate of 30 per cent. We have not seen an absentee rate of 30 per cent because the government, and Australia as a whole, has managed the health emergency quite well, but those additional staff have been able to shift their work online—shift their work remotely—and shift our shopfront services online, which has been a big change. It has not been without its hiccups. Overall, efficiencies have been gained, but the efficiencies have been largely through government investment and sticking to processes that we have had in place now for 12 to 18 months of staged assessments.

The other thing that we have done is that the director-general hosts a fortnightly meeting with all of the key peak bodies—architects, MBA, HIA, Property Council et cetera—to get the whole picture of what is happening in the industry. That has been able to point to where there might be any bottlenecks within the system. We actually have not seen those bottlenecks. I do not want to talk out of school, but we were actually congratulated by one of the stakeholders at our last meeting for being able to keep up the workload during this emergency.

The other thing that I will say about the construction industry is that 12 or 13 weeks ago we were fearing mass absenteeism and even worse. I think that every construction site really thought that it was going to be shut down. If they had COVID on site, they would need to be shut down. That is where the industry and those peak bodies really came together in sharing information about workplace health and safety. In Canberra we have seen no construction site shut down. I think that they would say that there has been a bit of a loss in productivity. Physical distancing has put a number of requirements onto construction work. So projects are taking probably a little longer to adapt, but I think all the fears that we had 12, 13 or 14 weeks ago have dissipated. I think that everyone is calling it a new normal; I am not sure that it is a new normal, but it is certainly new. So that is where we are now.

MS LE COUTEUR: You mentioned fortnightly meetings of peaks. It did not appear that the community was in any way involved in those. Is there anything that you are doing that does involve the community?

Mr Rutledge: At the peak level we have continued with our environment and planning forum to keep community councils up to date, and we have reshaped that agenda to be more of a strategic agenda. With respect to community engagement, each of the DAs still goes through exactly the same community engagement. We have made a few extensions because we had representations from community, particularly at the start of the health crisis. So we extended some time frames.

The other thing that I have seen—and, again, this is an industry response—is that pre-DA consultation has moved to online forums. I think that many people are still missing the roundtable discussion that we are all used to, but it has been interesting to

watch how community councils have moved to a new environment and how industry has responded with pre-DA consultation and DA consultation in these times. As I said, we have extended a few of the statutory time frames around community engagement just to allow people to work out the new way of working.

MS LE COUTEUR: So when are you going to restart more consultation in general? I am thinking particularly of the Territory Plan; what impact is all this having on that?

Mr Rutledge: Ben, do you want to take that?

Mr Ponton: Thank you, Ms Le Couteur. In relation to Territory Plan variations, there has been no impact as a result of COVID-19. There were some Territory Plan variations that were already out for public consultation when the health emergency was first declared. Those processes have concluded. One of them certainly was extended at the request of the community. We are now working through the comments that were received as a result of that process.

Probably the most significant impact, in terms of Territory Plan variations, has been advice from the Assembly committee that from May it would not be accepting any further referrals, given the time frames for it to conduct inquiries prior to caretaker and the election. It is that correspondence to the minister from the committee that has had the most significant impact on our ability to conclude Territory Plan variations, but COVID-19 has not had an impact.

MS LE COUTEUR: I was thinking not so much of the variations; my understanding is that there is a Territory Plan review in progress. What impact has COVID-19 had on that, which would not just be on consultation. Given the huge changes we have made—possibly temporarily—to how we get around the city or do not get around the city, has that influenced or will that influence the Territory Plan review?

Mr Ponton: It is a planning review. It is not just a Territory Plan review; it is the planning review and reform project. So when you talked about the Territory Plan, that is why I went straight to variations.

MS LE COUTEUR: I am sorry.

Mr Ponton: What we are working on is much, much bigger than that. It is looking at first principles. We now have five focus areas, and Dr Brady may want to comment in more detail on this shortly. We have continued that work, so policy work has not concluded. We had been engaging with industry and community over 2019, and more recently, in the early stages of 2020, we have had a number of sessions with those groups through PACICERG, which is the Planning and Construction Industry Chief Executives Reference Group. Also, in the environment and planning forum we talk through those five focus areas and the key directions that we have settled on in terms of the further work that now needs to be done in earnest during 2020. We got really good feedback on those directions.

So in terms of that early engagement this year, we have continued with the work. The government has, of course, provided funding for us to complete that work, both in terms of a midyear review and also for next year. So the work continues in earnest,

but we are at that point now where we do the busy work—which is the way I describe it. Having conducted the engagement and the scene-setting over 2019, it will be some time yet before we will be ready to come back and engage more fully with the community. Having said that, we do provide updates, as we can, to those key interest groups so that they are aware that work continues. For example, at the next environment and planning forum, which is in about two weeks' time, we will be providing a little bit more of an update in terms of how that work is progressing, but we will not have anything substantive to engage with the community on for some months yet. I might refer to Dr Brady now just to run us through the five focus areas, which may be of interest to the committee.

Dr Brady: Thank you. We did the review work across the whole system. As Mr Ponton said, it is a system-wide review. We identified five main areas that we want to focus on and we have mapped out how they all fit together to get us to a system that we think will be more outcomes focused, efficient and address and plan for the growth in a good way. One of the areas is about the system. It looks at all of the different parts within the system—that is, legislation and the different levels of policy. It also tries to include people and looks at how we include people in that system because some of the feedback we got was that people found our system quite difficult to navigate and understand. So that is one aspect of it.

Another aspect is the strategic planning. We have found that we have something quite solid with the planning strategy and we have a lot of detail in the Territory Plan and subsequent documents under that, but we probably need to give a bit more clarity to the community and understand what is important for the community at an in-between level. We have done that with different planning mechanisms—like master plans and the gateway framework and those sorts of things—but we probably need to provide a bit more clarity. So we have brought up recently that maybe we would look at districts and provide a different level of detail at that scale. So that is one area.

Another area is the development assessment process. So we are looking at whether the development assessment process we have is the most appropriate, going forward. Another one is development control—how we structure our development controls, and whether we could make them more outcome focused so that it is clearer what we are intending to get as the outcome, rather than being prescriptive but not always getting what we actually intend.

And then the final one of the five is system implementation and operation. It is looking at things like guides and online activity and how we can help people interact and understand the system better. There are a lot of subprojects and pieces of work within those, but we have mapped out how they all fit together. That is the busy work Mr Ponton referred to that we are doing now. We have spoken to various people in the community about the sorts of things we are looking at. We will work on them and then we will probably talk with them a bit more, as we pop out at the end of this year, about our findings and the way we think we want to head. That could be changes to the Territory Plan or changes to the Planning and Development Act. They could be the sorts of things that we end up with.

Through all the work that we are doing, we are looking at what is good practice from other jurisdictions in Australia and around the world. We are monitoring really

carefully and participating in discussions around ideas that people have about people wanting to interact with spaces in a different way because of COVID-19. So we are tracking that as well because that is important to our policy and the design controls and those sorts of things. I might leave that there.

MS LE COUTEUR: Okay, thank you. I was hoping to hear a bit more about how you thought COVID-19 was likely to impact on how we want to plan Canberra. There has obviously been a huge change in how much transport we are using. Is that part of the thinking?

Mr Ponton: Ms Le Couteur, it is early days. As Dr Brady indicated, that is part of the work that we are doing at the moment in terms of how the planning response to COVID-19 needs to feed into this work. We are looking not only across Australia but across the world in terms of how planning systems may need to respond. There has been some suggestion that, as a result of COVID-19, we should be steering away from density. Some people have suggested that, but then there are other analyses, work and studies being undertaken that suggest that that is not the best outcome. So we are working through that, and also looking at public spaces and how people use public spaces.

There are a whole range of things and a whole range of different studies that are occurring across the world that we are currently considering. The issue of density comes up from time to time, but the prevailing view in planning circles is that it is not the case that density is the issue; it is often how governments respond to issues, such as COVID-19, that is the real issue. There will certainly be impacts in terms of how the planning system responds—it is early days—and that will form part of the work that we need to do in coming months.

MRS DUNNE: I want to go back to the issue of planning for housing. There is an initiative that has come from the commonwealth as a stimulus package for the building industry. That relies upon the availability of land. Minister, could you give me a rundown on what the current land supply looks like, how many blocks are currently available in the market and what are the prices looking like at the moment?

Mr Gentleman: Each year we review our indicative land release program to ensure that we do have enough land supply for the market in single residential areas, opportunities for denser developments, as well as what we sometimes term the missing middle, which is our townhouse-style developments across the ACT.

We have seen sales drop a little bit over the last few months. This could be related to COVID or it could be related to market issues. We see across Australia a reduction in the number of people coming to buy new residential, not just here but, as I mentioned, right across Australia. The planning ministers conference talked about that. Of course, there is the change to the population growth that is now expected, with the reduction in the number of, for example, students coming to live in the ACT. It is a big hit to our tertiary areas. They look to provide opportunities for people to purchase in the city where they are studying. We have seen that play out here in the ACT now, with fewer students coming to ANU, for example—

MRS DUNNE: Minister, could we get back to the question: what is the current

pipeline of land supply? If there is an uptick in residential building that comes from the stimulus package, is there land available for people, and what are the prices? We have less than a quarter of an hour left and other people have questions to ask as well.

Mr Gentleman: I do not have the prices in front of me. That is not my area. I am happy to take that on notice and get those prices, if you like.

MRS DUNNE: Who is the minister responsible for the price of land?

Mr Gentleman: The Suburban Land Agency are the ones that sell the land to ACT residents or proponents that want to do construction in the ACT. We can find out the detail of the amounts that are available. I think we have that, Mr Ponton?

Mr Ponton: Yes, as the minister said, in terms of pricing, that is for the Suburban Land Agency. We can certainly talk to our colleagues in the Suburban Land Agency and get that for you.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you.

Mr Ponton: I will note that, while there was a reduction over the last 12 months in sales, with the last release in Whitlam all blocks sold in the first release. That was quite a promising result, and that was several weeks before the most recent stimulus announcements. We expect that there will be further take-up in further releases.

To respond to your immediate question, I understand—and Dr Brady will correct me if I am wrong—that, in terms of the current inventory on the shelf, there are in excess of 400 blocks available that are owned by the territory. The number is significantly more than that if you incorporate the private sector. There are in the order of 100 or 200 in Denman Prospect, so you are looking at around the 600 mark; 400 owned by the territory are sitting there and waiting to be sold. Of course, we have people out in the field constructing new areas—further stages of Whitlam et cetera. There are releases coming online. We certainly have a good inventory sitting on the shelf ready to go, which is a really good position to be in.

MRS DUNNE: Where is that inventory spread across? Is it mainly across Molonglo?

Mr Ponton: Could you repeat that question?

MRS DUNNE: Where is the inventory spread geographically? Is it mainly in Molonglo or are there—

Mr Ponton: In terms of the territory-owned land, the majority is in Gungahlin. There is some in Molonglo, but the majority is in suburbs such as Taylor and Throsby, I understand. We can talk to our colleagues in the Suburban Land Agency and get a list for you of blocks that are available and the pricing of those.

MRS DUNNE: That would be great. You spoke about Whitlam. I know that the land in Whitlam has been sold, but how far off are we from turning the first sod for buildings there? There is a lot of infrastructure that is still going in in Whitlam.

Mr Ponton: Again, I would need to get that from our colleagues in the Suburban Land Agency.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you.

Mr Ponton: They manage the delivery aspects. We are responsible for the land release policy. In terms of delivery and all of those questions that you are asking about, we will need to get that. We are certainly happy to talk to our colleagues and get that to the committee through Minister Gentleman.

MRS DUNNE: Great; thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, could you tell us how the government has been engaging with industry both at the height of the pandemic and now, as we look more towards the economic recovery?

Mr Gentleman: Yes; we engage regularly with industry. I engage at the ministerial level with key stakeholders across the ACT at their particular forums. We also deal with industry through those forums that we have set up, which Mr Ponton mentioned earlier—PACICERG. That is our strategic, more regular engagement with industry on all aspects across the ACT that allows us to talk about planning for the future and the concerns that they have. The speedy development assessment program is one instrument that they raised in that process, and we addressed it during the budget process. We now see that investment working well across the ACT, which is good.

There is an opportunity for us in a number of different platforms. It is also important that we engage with the community, and that is why we have moved to digital engagement with the community. A number of community councils have moved to digital engagement as well. It gives us the opportunity to hear from both industry and the community.

MR PETTERSSON: Were any of those forums particularly useful during the early days of the pandemic?

Mr Gentleman: PACICERG is probably the most useful forum because we engage with industry proponents at all levels. It could be the MBA, it could be the landscape architects, for example, as well as councillors from different jurisdictions. It is probably the most strategic forum for us to engage with. Ben, would you like to provide any other engagement processes that we have?

Mr Ponton: Given that the question related to the very early days, our colleagues in Major Projects Canberra engaged with, essentially, the membership of PACICERG. That group is quite a formal one that is run through EPSDD. That group was engaged by Major Projects Canberra. They were having daily 15 or 20 minute catch-ups to get a sense of how the industry was responding. It had a slightly different focus that was very much on how the industry would deal with COVID-safe work practices and the like, and to see whether there was anything that the government could do to assist in that regard. It was also about getting early intelligence in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on the industry.

As I said, those catch-ups were daily; they transitioned to weekly and we have now transitioned it back to the more formal structure of PACICERG. That is the Planning and Construction Industry Chief Executives Reference Group. It is one of my favourite acronyms! We are now back into that more strategic space. As I said in the early days, it was a matter of saying, “Give us the intelligence; what’s happening on the ground? What do we need to know?” Now we are looking at how we feed that into the work that we do—things such as the planning review and the like. We are back into that more formal, structured base now.

THE CHAIR: Minister, how much revenue has the ACT government received in this financial year from lease variation charges?

Mr Gentleman: I will have to take that on notice. I do not have those figures in front of me. I am happy to go to treasury and seek that.

THE CHAIR: Sure. Do any of your officials have a ballpark figure?

Mr Gentleman: Generally, around the room, no.

THE CHAIR: No-one has a ballpark figure as to how much money has been brought in by the lease variation charge as of June?

Mr Gentleman: Not from this directorate, no. We can find out for you, as I mentioned, through the treasury directorate.

THE CHAIR: Quite frankly, minister, I find it very hard to believe that nobody there has a ballpark figure.

Mr Ponton: It is important to note the role of the planning and land authority in the lease variation process. Whilst we deal with the development applications for the varying of leases, we work with determining the amount. In terms of it being paid, it is, of course, a tax, and that is through our colleagues in treasury. We do not keep the data on what is paid. I can certainly ask Mr Phillips to give you a sense of whether or not what we have been determining is similar to previous years, but in terms of what is being paid, that is not something that we would have at hand. We are certainly happy to get that for you.

THE CHAIR: I understand what your role is. Given that it is pretty pivotal to planning policy, I am amazed that nobody here, when you look at the titles of all of the officials that are here before us, has a clue as to how much—

Mr Ponton: Mr Coe, I would have to disagree. The payment of amounts of money for lease variation charge is not pivotal to planning policy. In terms of planning policy, that is separate from the tax regime. Lease variation charge is a tax and we work under delegation to determine that amount at the end of the process. In terms of its collection, it is a matter for our colleagues in treasury. I am more than happy to get that data for you. It is certainly not pivotal to planning policy.

THE CHAIR: Okay; it is interesting to hear that. How many instances of lease variation charge have been paid or issued by the agency in this financial year?

Mr Ponton: I will ask Mr Phillips to respond to that.

Mr Phillips: We have decided in excess of a thousand DAs in the system in this financial year. Around a quarter of those have a lease variation component, which means that if, for example, for a unit title matter, there is an application to add a certain number of units onto a particular development application, the lease variation component might relate to an amendment to the number of units that can be built or an amendment to the GFA. That information is put together and provided in normal financial returns. I can get the information in relation to the precise numbers, but I do not have the precise numbers available.

THE CHAIR: Treasury do not provide a report to the agency?

Mr Phillips: We have financial reports on a yearly basis in relation to the revenue that is obtained from lease variation charges. As I said, I do not have one currently, at this stage of the financial year.

THE CHAIR: The question was: does treasury provide a report to the directorate about how much has been paid for lease variation?

Mr Phillips: Lease variation charges and payments appear. We do get a report. The information is reported in our annual report when it is released in about September.

THE CHAIR: I am keen to see what internal reporting there is. With what frequency do you get reports from treasury containing this information?

Mr Phillips: We receive those reports—an end of financial year report, Mr Coe. I would have to take the question on notice and get information from our chief financial officer as to when those reports are obtained.

THE CHAIR: Minister, can somebody tell me what internal reporting takes place from treasury with regard to lease variation charges and all of the other payments that relate to planning policy?

Mr Ponton: Mr Coe, as I said earlier, that is a matter for treasury, in terms of the reporting.

THE CHAIR: I am asking about the reporting to the directorate.

Mr Ponton: Mr Phillips has answered that, in terms of end of financial year reporting.

THE CHAIR: No. He has—

Mr Ponton: As I said earlier, it is not pivotal to planning policy. Our focus is on the assessment of applications, and making sure that those applications have been assessed in accordance with the planning system. In terms of the payment of lease variation charge, it is a taxation policy. That is a matter for—

THE CHAIR: Minister, you get a monthly report, don't you, from treasury with this

information, or your directorate gets a monthly report; is that correct?

Mr Phillips: My understanding, Mr Coe, is that treasury provides financial reports to our chief finance officer. My understanding is that those financial reports are made annually. The chief finance officer will, no doubt, have access to other reports. As I said, we will take that question on notice and provide the information to you that you have requested.

THE CHAIR: Are you saying that only the chief financial officer gets those reports and the executives do not get it? Is that what you are saying, minister?

Mr Phillips: As I said, those reports are provided by treasury through the treasury line, through our chief financial officer.

THE CHAIR: Do all of the executives get a copy of that report? Do some of the executives on this call right now see those reports?

Mr Gentleman: Mr Coe, we have answered probably as much as we can on this—

THE CHAIR: No, you have not. Do people on this call receive monthly treasury reports?

Mr Gentleman: I am happy to take it on notice and provide you with the answer.

THE CHAIR: No. Minister, please answer the question: do people on this call receive monthly treasury reports with relevant financial information about planning policy, including the lease variation charge?

Mr Gentleman: Mr Phillips has given you the answer.

THE CHAIR: No, he has not. I am asking you, minister.

Mr Gentleman: With respect to the detail of what you have asked for, I will take that on notice and we will come back to you with the answer.

THE CHAIR: How can you not be aware of a key management tool? Do people on this call, executives, get monthly financial reports from treasury? If not, there is a major issue with governance in this agency.

Mr Ponton: Mr Coe, I do not agree with that.

THE CHAIR: We cannot hear you, Mr Ponton.

Mr Ponton: Okay. Can you hear me now?

THE CHAIR: We can.

Mr Ponton: I do not agree with what you just said, Mr Coe. I need to point out again that we assess development applications for change of use. Figures for lease variation—

THE CHAIR: I am asking the question: do you get monthly financial reports—

Mr Ponton: I am answering the question—

THE CHAIR: from treasury or not?

Mr Ponton: I am going to answer that, Mr Coe. In terms of what our responsibility is, the lease variation charge is a matter for treasury. It is a taxation policy—

THE CHAIR: I understand that.

Mr Ponton: To answer your question, there is no need for me to get those. I certainly do not receive those reports. I do not need to know how much treasury is collecting in terms of its revenue because it does not influence my assessment of development applications. Mr Phillips has indicated that he does not receive those reports directly, but we do get, for our annual reporting at the end of the financial year, the detail for inclusion in the annual report. It is not pivotal to planning policy—

THE CHAIR: I realise that you do not get them directly, but you get them indirectly because the chief financial officer, surely, forwards it to the executives—surely?

Mr Ponton: I do not see an individual report on lease variation charges because it is not a matter that I need to see. It is not revenue that I collect, Mr Coe.

THE CHAIR: You do not get that as a component of other financial reports?

Mr Ponton: Not separately outlined, no.

THE CHAIR: Okay, so you—

Mr Ponton: It is not revenue that I collect and it is not pivotal to the assessment process or the planning system.

THE CHAIR: Minister, I hope you will come back to the committee as a matter of urgency if anything that we have heard in the last 10 minutes is not accurate.

Mr Ponton: Certainly, but I can assure you—

THE CHAIR: That is to the minister.

Mr Gentleman: As I said, Mr Coe, we are happy to take those questions on notice and come back with the detailed answer for you.

THE CHAIR: Sure. We started a few minutes late, so I am happy to hear a final question from Ms Cheyne.

MS CHEYNE: I appreciate that we have had environment directorate officials here for an hour and no questions have been directed to them. In the time that we have available, do we have an estimate of when Namadgi might be reopened, given that

people are getting out and about more often? I appreciate that a part of Namadgi is open, but when will it be reopened as a whole, and what is the delay?

Mr Gentleman: I might answer quickly and then pass over to Ian, our Conservator of Flora and Fauna. The directorate has done quite a bit of work in Namadgi. Indeed, what we term the upper part of Namadgi has now been reopened; so the Cotter areas have been reopened, which is great. A lot of people have expressed an interest in wanting to come back and visit the park, which is fantastic, but we are concerned about some of the infrastructure that was destroyed during the bushfires in the southern part of Namadgi, particularly road surfaces, tracks—a danger for footing, for example. As soon as we get those back up to speed and it is safe to reopen, we will be happy to do so. I will pass over to Ian to give you those details.

Mr Walker: Thanks, Ms Cheyne, for the question. We are working through making sure that the Namadgi National Park is safe to open, and that is the most critical thing that we are doing at the moment. That includes removing dangerous trees and making sure tracks and roads are safe to access. The transition to reopening the park will be exactly that—a transition. Our teams have been out there vigorously undertaking works and operations to make the park safe. Over the coming months we will progressively open the park for access.

As the minister has highlighted, we have opened the northern part of Namadgi. Tidbinbilla is open. Our parks are open to people, in those areas. I would also highlight that Canberra Nature Park has been open across the whole COVID-19 period; in fact, it has been highly visited. It has been one of the respites for the community in the ACT; their wellbeing, their health and their recreational opportunity have benefited from having Canberra Nature Park open. As I said, access and numbers going to Canberra Nature Park have been beyond the records that we have previously had.

Ms Cheyne, to answer your question, Namadgi will be opened progressively over the coming months. We will notify the community of that, and we will ensure that the park is safe and accessible to the community.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, minister, and officials. A copy of the transcript will be sent to you. I urge you to review it closely.

Mr Gentleman: Thank you.

ORR, MS SUZANNE, Minister for Community Services and Facilities, Minister for Disability, Minister for Employment and Workplace Safety, Minister for Government Services and Procurement

WOOD, MS JO, Director-General, Community Services Directorate

NICOL, MR DAVID, Under Treasurer, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

SABELLICO, MS ANNE-MAREE, Deputy Director-General, Community Services Directorate

STRACHAN, MR SHAUN, Deputy Under Treasurer, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

SUMMERRELL, MS JESSICA, Executive Branch Manager, Social and Community Inclusion, Community Services Directorate

BORGESSE, MR JOSEPH, Executive Branch Manager, Chief Financial Officer, Community Service Directorate

BAIN, MR GLENN, Executive Group Manager, Procurement ACT, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

CHARLES, MS AMANDA, Senior Director, Office for Disability, Inclusion and Participation, Community Services Directorate

THE CHAIR: Minister, thank you very much for joining this select committee on the ACT's response to COVID-19. As you are well aware, a privilege statement has been sent through to you and all your officials. Could you and each of your officials please state that you are okay with the privilege statement?

Ms Orr: I have seen the privilege statement and I am okay with it.

Ms Wood: I accept the privilege statement.

Mr Nicol: I note the privilege statement.

Ms Sabellico: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Summerrell: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Strachan: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Bain: I acknowledge the statement as well.

Mr Borgesse: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Charles: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Orr: I have an opening statement that I will just run you through. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. I acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. I also extend my respect to elders past, present and emerging.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. As Minister for Community Services and Facilities, as well as Minister for Government Services and

Procurement, I am proud of the work of the ACT government, public officials and the community in supporting Canberra through the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has impacted and continues to impact many members of the Canberra community. While some people affected by the pandemic were already users of services and supports, the pandemic has further demonstrated that many more members of our community are requiring flexible and responsive supports.

On 20 March 2020, in recognition of the rapidly evolving situation and to support our community, the ACT government announced a community support package, a package totalling \$9 million, to meet increased demand for emergency food relief and mental health and other support services to members of our community. The package has been distributed between the Community Services Directorate and the ACT Health Directorate—\$7 million and \$2 million, respectively. We are working as quickly as possible to plan, design and make available flexible funding to support organisations and the Canberra community. As a government, we are doing what we can to ensure no-one is alone or without support during these unprecedented times.

In March the Canberra relief network was established in response to the community's increasing demand for food and non-perishable essential items following the COVID-19 pandemic. The Canberra relief network is a collaboration and network of a number of community service organisations in the ACT. As at close of business on 5 June 2020, the Canberra relief network connect centre had recorded a total of 4,134 calls from Canberrans in need, as well as broader community interest in volunteering to support the initiative, and connecting clients with wraparound supports to ensure they are supported holistically.

The delivery of food relief hampers commenced on 1 April 2020, with 4,213 general hampers delivered to agencies as at close of business on 5 June 2020. In addition, 20 gluten-free hampers and 357 hygiene hampers have also been delivered, supporting 55 local women with sanitary items and 52 local families with baby items such as nappies and baby wipes. The provision of these items has been possible by securing a grocery partnership with Woolworths for the Canberra relief network.

I acknowledge the collaborative effort of ACT government agencies, community partners, local businesses and the volunteers who have come together for the benefit of those in the Canberra community who have been impacted in this current time, working quickly and tirelessly to ensure that they have access to food and non-perishable essential items. The Community Services Directorate and the community sector have taken active measures to ensure that Canberrans who may be experiencing difficulties are supported, including through additional welfare checks for families engaged with services and outreach to families accessing the national disability insurance service.

We are also undertaking data analysis across both quantitative and qualitative sources, including the direct experiences of people most impacted by COVID-19, so that we can quickly respond to any new or emerging needs and ensure that our responses are based on evidence and what people say will work for them. We are also working with our community sector partners to understand what the changed environment means for them so that they can continue to provide critical support for Canberrans. This includes understanding where and how services are being brought back to face-to-face

service delivery, providing extra assistance to do so where this is needed, preparing the sector to flex up and down throughout the easing of social distancing measures, and making sure we learn from and embed any innovations which have delivered better outcomes for our community. The package also provides funding for our community partners to support Canberrans, with a focus on key partners that are experiencing high demand in services as a result of COVID-19.

Throughout COVID-19 and the planned recovery, the ACT government is committed to supporting community resilience in Canberra by promoting community engagement and the maintenance of social infrastructure. We are working together to ensure that people in Canberra have opportunities to connect, to contribute, to feel valued and to have a strong sense of belonging.

As part of the Canberra cares initiative, over 7,500 Anzac Day, Mother's Day and Reconciliation Day community activity packs were prioritised for households most in need of support or more adversely impacted by COVID-19. A big thank you to our partners in the community, including Communities@Work and numerous other community organisations offering assistance in developing and distributing these packs.

We are also making more than \$320,000 available to not-for-profit organisations for projects that support the community to stay connected and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic through the participation of the digital communities grant and the community support and infrastructure grants. We are working as one government and one community to develop solutions to issues as they arise, as the pandemic continues to evolve, resulting in unforeseen impacts requiring a whole-of-community strategy development response.

In order to continue responding proactively, on Wednesday, 20 May 2020 the Chief Minister announced the significant next steps on our road to recovery, including the Canberra recovery plan. In recognition that the wellbeing of our community has been strained in recent months, there will be a community focus as part of our recovery plan, and the ACT government is committed that our recovery plan will not leave Canberrans behind and it will not let people slip through the cracks.

This is why, as Minister for Community Services and Facilities, I will be coordinating the government's community recovery plan, working closely with our community services sector to ensure that the right support is made available across our city. The ACT government, with the vital support of officials across the ACT public service, has responded proactively to the health emergency. I continue to appreciate the collective response that has been fostered throughout the pandemic and, importantly, I wish to convey my admiration for our community services sector providers who have continued to show up and demonstrate why they are so critical to the wellbeing of our community.

I also acknowledge the work done across the ACT public service to ensure continuity of services and the ACT government activity, and I look forward to continuing to work closely with officials and the sector as part of the recovery process.

MS LE COUTEUR: Minister, you mentioned the \$7 million community support

package. Has that been fully expended and/or committed as yet, and can you provide a list of organisations who have received it?

Ms Orr: The short answer is yes, but I think you probably want something a little more detailed than that in response. Yes, we have gone through it. I note that it has been quite a big coordination task, given that it has been across the Community Services Directorate and the ACT Health Directorate, wanting to take in quite a broad range of organisations and also understanding the impacts on them, and making sure that we are supporting the sector the way they need to be and that we are supporting the community with the additional crisis response supports they need right now.

A number of ministers, coordinated through me, have actually worked on putting that package together. We have put the package together. I can get Anne-Maree Sabellico to update you a bit more on this, but most of the arrangements have been done and the money has started going out the door. We can take on notice and provide you a list of what is going where. Anne-Maree, is there anything that you would like to add on the package?

Ms Sabellico: Thanks, Ms Le Couteur, for the question. Of the \$7 million that forms part of the community support stimulus package that CSD has been managing, we have worked with the ministers to identify and allocate nearly all of the \$7 million, and we have been working through with the providers who are recipients of the funding to actually develop their contracts, be that through a specific deed of grant or a service funding agreement, depending on whether or not it is in line with current arrangements. We have had to work through all of those.

We have then also made sure that we have fully executed before payment can be made. Those payments are now being made, given that we have had a high proportion of the agreements returned jointly signed. That is where we are at in covering off on all the announcements made to date.

We have also had a number of grants rounds, as mentioned by the minister. In particular with the rapid response grant rounds, we have managed to nearly complete that allocation of \$1 million as well, in terms of approving and then working through how to have the money sent through to the agencies that have been successful.

MS LE COUTEUR: That leads to an awful lot of supplementary questions. You said that it was nearly all of the \$7 million. Can you be a little more precise than that? That could be \$4 million; that could be \$6.5 million. You said you were developing contracts. How much have you actually allocated, which is nearly \$7 million? How much of that has actually gone to the organisations who will be the recipients? How much of this have you actually spent?

Ms Orr: Given that it is quite a detailed question, we might take that one on notice and provide to you the actual breakdown—I get an update and it changes almost every day—just to make sure we have got the updated ones.

I think the concern that you are getting to here is making sure that all the money is being spent and is getting out into the community, if I have got your—

MS LE COUTEUR: Yes.

Ms Orr: And that is certainly a concern I have had throughout all this. We need to make sure the money goes out the door and is getting to where it needs to go.

The allocations happened quite quickly, which gave certainty to a number of organisations that they knew that they could rely on that money coming. We obviously need to follow through with proper governance, which is what Ms Sabellico has been talking about, in making sure we get the contractual deeds correct. Some of those have been easier to work through than others, from the advice I have received from CSD. They can certainly go into a bit more detail on that. But it is something—where the money is coming—that is not very far off from being finalised.

As to your question about what has been allocated and what has not been allocated, we did keep a very small contingency. We are not talking millions of dollars here, but we did keep a very small contingency, given that so many of the impacts we were seeing were unfolding quite rapidly and we did not quite know exactly everything that we would have to be responding to. I believe that we are just looking now at the final parts of the contingency as to where best we can place that. Ms Sabellico, did you have anything you wanted to add around those?

Ms Sabellico: Only that the contingency is effectively a couple of hundred thousand dollars at this stage. We are talking about most of the \$7 million being allocated and we are on track to look to have about \$5.5 million of the \$7 million out the door once all the grant arrangements are signed off by the end of the financial year. Some of the money left is because the contracts go over the two financial years as well. Some contracts do that. The money is allocated. The payment will not be made, though, until next financial year. But we are on track for the \$5.5 million for the end of this financial year.

MS LE COUTEUR: Correct me if I am wrong, but the impression I am getting from this is that the vast majority of the \$7 million is still in the government's hands, not in the hands of the community organisations. Am I misinterpreting you or not?

Ms Sabellico: All money has been allocated to the community sector, the NGOs. There is no money being held by government, other than we need to wait for the appropriate signing of contracts to be able to release the funds. But the funds are being released as those arrangements are in place.

MS LE COUTEUR: It sounds like the money has been allocated but it has not yet been delivered. That is what I think you are saying.

Ms Sabellico: Only for a smaller proportion, whereby the contractual arrangements are yet to be signed off. But for those which have been, the money has been allocated, as long as the process has been addressed.

MS LE COUTEUR: Have you any idea how much actually has gone to the community sector?

Ms Sabellico: Yes.

MS LE COUTEUR: I have had feedback from the community sector that they have had funds promised, and they just do not understand why.

Ms Sabellico: As per the minister stating at the beginning, we can provide you with that information. We have a table that goes to each allocation, where it is up to and where the money has actually been allocated as well. We can provide that in detail for you.

MS LE COUTEUR: Can you also provide some information about how you decide where to allocate the money? I am sure there would have been more than \$7 million worth of requests for funding.

Ms Sabellico: We can certainly provide an overview of the priorities and the processes that we went through to decide the priorities and then how that was allocated, and which ones actually went to grants and what the process was for the grant applications.

MS LE COUTEUR: Was the community sector consulted in doing this?

Ms Orr: Absolutely. At one stage I was having almost daily check-ins with the head of ACTCOSS, Emma Campbell, knowing that she was also working quite closely with the community sector. Plus, I rang a number of providers. The directorate and the directorate liaison officers have been working very closely with the sector throughout all this to hear their feedback.

It has been very interesting, from the feedback that we have received, that not everything has necessarily gone to providing more money. I know that we have provided a level of flexibility in contracts so that people could adapt their business practices to COVID responses and not have to necessarily be tied to a response that was not appropriate, given that we had to change business models so rapidly.

The grants package, in particular, was something that came about through the conversation with the community sector, in that they were saying that they needed to have quite a lot of flexibility and adaptability to get on with a range of things, which is what the rapid response grants were there for—quite a large part of the package—in that, essentially, the groups could put in what they needed and, if it hit off a very broad criteria then they could be provided with the money.

Anne-Maree, maybe you can just run through a little more about how those rapid response grants are working, just because they really were in response to the various needs that the community sector raised with us.

Ms Sabellico: We opened up the rapid response grants with eligibility criteria for any agency to apply for the extra support that they needed, being mindful, of course, of people being able to apply since the date of the emergency being called. We wanted to make sure that we covered the whole period. Really, it was about supporting people with the extra resources and supports that they needed to be able to address the demand or to address the flexibility of remote working and all those sorts of things. We made it quite a broad criteria for people to apply. We then committed to doing, as

we called them, rapid responses because we committed to making sure that we had a response back to people within 14 days of the application.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, probably the first hearing the committee had was with ACTCOSS. One of the issues that arose then was the availability of PPE for personal service provision for people with disability, people on NDIS. There has been some relaxation of the availability of PPE. Could you give the committee an update, from your point of view, about where we are in providing appropriate PPE to people who are service providers to NDIS recipients?

Ms Orr: Yes. The first thing I would acknowledge is that the discussion around PPE has been, I think, quite a complex discussion, given the number of components and the amount of advice that has gone into forming that. In the first instance, we have had to follow the health advice that has been there. We know, and certainly the feedback I got was, that that created a lot of concern for people who would usually be accessing PPE, and that is something that I have been very cognisant of and have been making a number of representations—

MRS DUNNE: Just to interpose here, given the amount of time, I do not need a history lesson. I think all the committee is across that. It is about where are we now and what are the prospects for the provision of PPE to NDIS recipients?

Ms Orr: I will hand over to Amanda Charles to go through this in detail, if you are specifically asking about disability provision. NDIS provides the PPE to NDIS participants, but the ACT government has also stepped in to provide PPE to people with a disability without necessarily accessing it through the NDIS. What I will do is ask Ms Charles to actually go through in detail for you the different ways that PPE can be accessed.

Ms Charles: We have approximately 15 organisations who are disability-specific organisations who have applied for and received PPE through the CSD PPE portal, and approximately two or three individuals with disability have accessed PPE through that portal. The broader disability sector is aware of the possibility to access those. Many more organisations have accessed PPE through that portal, but approximately 15, at my last count, were organisations that were disability specific.

Organisations can apply through the national medical stockpile—and that is the recommendation on the NDIA portal and the NDIA safeguards portal—but you can only access masks through that portal, which is not strictly what people with disability are requiring in that space.

We have had quite broad communication with the sector and people with disability about how they can access PPE, and everybody who has applied for it has received it. That is where we are at at this point in time.

MRS DUNNE: When you say that the NDIS portal gives access to masks, what PPE is the ACT community services portal giving? What PPE do people accessing it through the community services portal get?

Ms Charles: To date, we are talking about masks, hand sanitiser, some aprons. I think

that is largely the component that people have asked for. It is generally masks and hand sanitiser that people with disability have been requesting to be able to have continuity of support in their own homes. I am open to someone else telling me what else people are requiring, but that is my understanding.

MR PETTERSSON: I have some questions about the CRN. You mentioned some numbers at the start of the hearing—about 4,000 calls and 4,000 hampers. Is that correct?

Ms Orr: Yes. According to my notes, as at 5 June 2020 it was a total of 4,134 calls, and 4,213 general hampers have gone out.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering if you had any further detail as to the breakdown of distribution of those hampers. Is that 4,000 people each getting one hamper or is that 2,000 people getting two hampers?

Ms Orr: It is probably a bit counterintuitive to say this, but just because you have got one hamper, it does not mean that you will necessarily come back and have another. If I have understood where your question is going, it is trying to get a better idea of how many people, individuals, are accessing the network. It is also going out to organisations to make sure that people who have been running food pantries still have that support and that continuity of service. Jess Summerrell has been living and breathing this one. I might hand over to her to go through all the detail for you.

Ms Summerrell: As the minister described, people can receive multiple hampers over that period. As of close of business on 5 June, there were 2,070 Canberra households who were registered with the CRN for support. That is the number of households who are receiving a hamper. The hampers are distributed through our community organisation partners. They receive them through there in most cases.

MR PETTERSSON: Do you have any measure of how demand for these hampers is tracking with time? Was there more demand for hampers a couple of months ago, as opposed to now?

Ms Summerrell: It is hard to say because the way that the model works is that it is a centralised model, where food hampers are within community organisations. They would have been providing that support previously. A lot of that has been centralised so that we can assist those community organisations to support their clients. It is quite difficult to know whether or not that is an increase and what it is looking like, but we believe that the increase since the establishment of the CRN is more significant than what the community sector would normally see.

MR PETTERSSON: I will keep trying in a different form: what is the current demand for these hampers?

Ms Orr: I might jump in because I think I understand what you are trying to get at. You are trying to get a sense of the demand we have seen there that we would not necessarily have seen. Is this what you want, what the new demand is? I think that this has been a really complex piece of public policy. So far as we know, one of the most basic supports that people need in a crisis is food, and we did see very early on that

there were huge concerns about the supply of food. We certainly saw some pretty worrying behaviour in how supermarkets were being cleared out, for lack of a better way to put it.

A lot of discussion that led to the establishment of this was trying to shore up that supply to make sure, as this unfolded, as the COVID pandemic unfolded, that we did have food going to people who needed it and could not otherwise get it. And that actually sat a little more broadly than it usually would have, in that we had a lot of people who were choosing to self-isolate. People who would not usually be accessing food pantries suddenly needed a source to get that from. That is where this collaboration has come together across the sector. Part of it will be the food going out to our community partners, making sure that they have an uninterrupted supply during this time to make sure that they can service and provide food to the people they would usually be supporting.

We also knew that we would have a lot of people who were susceptible to vulnerabilities in this area that never would have previously been. That is why we put together the network so that there was one very clear point of contact that people could access through the phone line, through contacting the CRN, to actually get access to the food that they needed. We have seen a range of people come forward through that, and the supports you can get there are quite broad.

In particular, we were focusing on the elderly who, not necessarily for financial reasons, could not access food, but because they are self-isolating and do not want to go to the supermarket, would need help getting that food to them, particularly if they do not have family or other supports here to do shopping runs for them. We were focusing on people with a disability who, again, feel quite susceptible to the health impacts of COVID and do not want to take the risk of exposure. Again, it is another avenue for them to access, to get the food that they need so that they have got that continuity. We have had a number of international students come forward to the CRN, given that they have been in a really precarious position throughout all this, just to make sure that no-one is going hungry during this time.

That has really been the focus of the CRN, that collaborative community network, but we were also opening up the provision to people who we would not usually see accessing these services but who did access them just at that particular point in time, at the very beginning of the pandemic when we were seeing that real uncertainty and the heightened level of anxiety. That was where we were looking to put the support and who this has provided support to.

I also note that when you call the CRN, which operates in the same way as most food pantry models work across Canberra, you are actually getting someone answering the phone who has expertise in counselling and providing support. It will not be everyone, but people who call up and are asking for food can often be in a pretty vulnerable state and need a lot more support than simply food. Food is the way to open up that conversation. All the counsellors on the phone are actually pretty good at identifying someone who might just need food, but they are pretty good at identifying whether they need those additional services.

It is actually a way for us to also put in those wraparound services and to continue to

support people beyond just providing food. It works quite well as a network for that too. That is where our community service partners, in particular, through that network are quite valuable. We can get those supports and those wraparound supports going. Jess, is there anything you want to add to that?

Ms Summerrell: No, I do not think that there is anything more I can add to it.

MS CHEYNE: I appreciate how good the CRN has been and the number of people who have been supported, not just with food but also with the broader wraparound services. Has there been anyone seeking to take advantage of the CRN, the food pantry, who actually is not eligible, and/or has there been anyone who calls and just does not fit the criteria for whatever reason?

Ms Orr: The criteria are quite broad, so from that perspective most people have been able to access it. We have said “if you’ve been impacted by COVID-19”. So it does rely on people to do the right thing. The view we had was that we did not want to put barriers in the way of people who really need access to this service. So there is a bit of an honesty system there. I believe that most Canberrans are pretty honest and are not going to take advantage of this.

As I have learnt through food provision since having this portfolio, there are some pretty good tricks and methods in place to make sure that people do not abuse the system. I do not know if I should run through all of those because then people will know how to make their way around them. One example is that if you call up five times and give five different names but the same address, it is all logged through a database and people will know that that house is perhaps getting a few more hampers than it is entitled to. That is where you can go and have the conversation and delve a bit deeper as to what is going on. So it is not the case that it is not checked and there is not rigour in the system; it is there. There are red flags that can come up. The service providers through the CRN and through all food pantry provision, on my understanding, put these in place. It is pretty standard practice.

THE CHAIR: Minister, how do you interact with all the established food pantries in the suburbs, often run by churches and other community groups? How do you make sure that you are working in a complementary way rather than either in a competitive way or duplicating services?

Ms Orr: As far as the detail goes, I will hand over to Jess to go through how the mechanisms of the network have worked. I note that it was a voluntary network; you could sign up to it. It was there to provide extra support and capture the extra demand that was coming through. I think that that goes to part of the question that you have asked. Jess, is there anything that you would like to add in answer to Mr Coe’s question?

Ms Summerrell: I start by saying that we have seen really great collaboration across the sector. When this started, there was a lot of panic in the sector and across Canberra about food stock availability. It was established at a period of time when the shelves were empty and people were really nervous about how to get food, and also a lot of our community organisations that run pantries were starting to reflect that nervousness about their ongoing ability to have stock and supply. With the centralised

model we have seen a really great partnership, because it has been able to give community organisations the reassurance that they can continue to support their clients that they see every week, who they have ongoing relationships with. It is really important to them that they get the ongoing ability to help that person. That is where we have seen really great collaboration.

Logistically, to make sure that we keep in touch with them, we have a process where we check in regularly with them. We are very open to their feedback, and there are people we have who are spending time checking in and making sure that they are going okay. We also work with the community organisations to encourage them to supplement the boxes. If they have clients with particular needs and they know that a particular product is really important to that person but is not in the hamper, we have been working with those community organisations to make sure that that is still available for their clients. We have been using the hampers as a process to supplement and work with them. We have seen really great response from the sector.

THE CHAIR: How much longer will this network be operational?

Ms Orr: The original commitment from when it commenced was that we would review it as to the need and the demand.

THE CHAIR: Minister, how have you procured the food and other items to go in the packs?

Ms Orr: I will have to hand over to Jess so that she can run through the detail for you.

Ms Summerrell: When it was first established, there was a real urgent need. So, from the date of announcement, straightaway we had people saying, “Great—I need food and I need it now.” So, initially, we worked with the partnerships that we had, with organisations like OzHarvest and Foodbank, to get food in straightaway, but that was not a long-term solution for us because they also have a role in supporting lots of people through their charitable organisations. So, alongside that, we commenced negotiations with some supermarket supplier partners and, through work with the national supermarket committee, we established a relationship with Woolworths to be our grocery partner. That was based on a range of measures that we looked at, including their ability to provide the stock, going forward. That was a major factor in the decision-making. Woolworths provided that to us at no profit: they are not making a profit on the food that they supply us.

MS CHEYNE: Woolworths do seem to have led the way, in many respects, in the way that they have approached the support they have provided to the community during this time. Did you approach Coles as well or was it just immediately obvious that Woolworths was the best provider?

Ms Summerrell: We did approach a range of providers. We did that through the national supermarket committee that exists. We put forward, through that committee, that we were looking to enter into an agreement with a grocery partner who could provide ongoing stock for us for the period of time, and we put forward that we were seeking for it to be either at no profit or some arrangement. We looked at multiple options to get the best possible outcomes. We looked at hybrid models, like whether

Coles could provide some things that Woolworths could not. We looked at a range of things.

We wanted to ensure that the hampers had the ability to provide families with breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, and also with food that was easy to cook: something that people felt confident with. We are aware that people have lots of different ranges of ability in terms of cooking. For some families receiving these packs, cooking is not necessarily something that they are used to doing. We needed to make sure that the products we were providing met all of those criteria. So it was definitely a process of making sure that we could get a supplier that really did meet the needs of our community.

MS CHEYNE: Woolworths seems to have been very generous during this time. Is it as generous as it seems or is there some sort of quid pro quo going on here? Are they asking for something in return from the government, given that they are not making any profit out of this?

Ms Summerrell: My interactions with Woolworths have been incredibly positive, and they have not requested of me anything in terms of branding or recognition, in that sense. They have been very committed, through the national supermarket committee, to support communities and to work with us.

This model in the ACT is quite unique for Woolworths, so we have not neatly fitted into the box of how they distribute and deliver stocks. They normally deliver to other supermarkets or other large pantries or to people, so this has been something quite different for them. I met with them last week and they indicated that they were going to use this as a bit of a model that they could test with other jurisdictions as well, now that we have been able to work through the logistics of delivery—because we have delivery trucks coming from multiple parts of Australia to us. The delivery is included in the arrangement that we have with them. The pallets come on large semitrailers. So it is quite a commercial operation but they are doing it more as a community partnership.

MRS DUNNE: You said, in relation to sourcing Woolworths, that you went through the Australian supermarket council. Did you engage with any of the local supermarket providers?

Ms Summerrell: The independent grocers association are represented on that committee, as far as I understand.

MRS DUNNE: But you engaged through a national committee; you did not engage at a local level? You did not actively attempt to source those groceries from local grocery suppliers?

Ms Summerrell: We used the mechanism through the independent grocers association, who were keeping in touch with, as I understand it, local suppliers. At the time when this happened, the large supermarkets were the only people who actually had availability of a large quantity of stock. Some of the smaller supermarkets, through that committee, were certainly raising concern about their stock and supply.

MRS DUNNE: Could you, on notice, provide for the committee the quantity of stock that you have distributed or that you have ready for distribution through this period?

Ms Summerrell: Yes. To clarify, do you mean in terms of pallets, tonnage, kilograms or—

MRS DUNNE: I do not mind. You are giving out—

Ms Summerrell: Something like 3,000 things of pasta—is that what you mean?

MRS DUNNE: Yes, that sort of thing. Presumably there is an inventory somewhere.

Ms Summerrell: There is.

MRS DUNNE: Can you provide that inventory, on notice?

Ms Summerrell: I am happy to take that on notice.

MS CHEYNE: Perhaps you can also tell us what is included in each pack that is distributed.

Ms Summerrell: Yes. I will take it on notice and give you the full list, but I do have a breakdown of some of the items here that I am happy to go through. In the general hamper we have cereal, oats, muesli, couscous, rice, pasta, pasta sauce, milk—we do provide some lactose-free milk options—vegemite, peanut butter, teabags, coffee, canned spaghetti in tomato sauce, instant noodles, stir-fry sauce, tuna, four-bean mix, vegetables, sugar, flour, tinned fruit, biscuits, muesli bars and rice crackers, and we also provide toilet paper. That is in the general box. Then, as the minister mentioned in her opening statement, we provide a gluten-free box. That has a range of gluten-free items—gluten-free cereal, gluten-free pasta sauce. The items from the general box that are gluten free go in that box as well, but we make sure that we have some very specific gluten-free items for our gluten-free community.

Ms Orr: I note that the gluten-free provision came from feedback from the sector, in particular feedback that came through ACTCOSS, on the need to make sure that that was supplied. It is a really good example of how Jess and her team have worked with the sector to make sure that the government response is getting out to everyone who needs it, and of having iterative feedback so that we can adapt to it. Mrs Dunne, if you would like, I am happy to take on notice, as well as the inventory of stock, a little more on the discussion of how the contract was put together and what discussions with different organisations—

MRS DUNNE: Thank you, that would be great.

MS CHEYNE: How Woolworths was able to supply toilet paper through the CRN but not necessarily to supermarkets would also be interesting to know.

Ms Orr: We will endeavour to answer that one. I am not sure anyone will ever know the answer to that question, but we will do our best.

MS LE COUTEUR: Did you get dietary advice in terms of the contents of your hampers? You were talking about it having to be convenient to cook but, given that people are living on these for months, how are you going nutritionally?

Ms Summerrell: We did speak with Nutrition Australia in relation to what was in the box and getting some suggestions. When we were developing the grocery list that we wanted, we did have a conversation with Nutrition Australia. We have also had some conversations with them—and this is something that we are still looking at—about whether we can provide on the website, based on the contents of the box, some recipe ideas from Nutrition Australia that could assist people in the cooking as well.

MS LE COUTEUR: Your list appeared to have no fresh fruit or vegetables; is that correct?

Ms Summerrell: That is correct. Because the hampers are items that have a long shelf life, they do not include fresh produce. As I mentioned before, other community organisations and pantries have access to and often keep frozen meat and vegetables in their pantries. So for people who rely on food pantries for the procurement of all of their food, we would encourage them to continue that relationship and use this box as a supplementary box. Because we get the stock in and we keep it and pack it, it is not possible for us to hold fresh items. It just would not be viable.

MS LE COUTEUR: Have you looked at canned fruit and vegetables as the long-life option?

Ms Summerrell: There is canned ham and tuna, and there are tomatoes and tinned fruit as well.

MS LE COUTEUR: Good. On Tuesday the COVID committee went out to see the new pop-up emergency department. One of the things they said was that they are having considerable difficulties with procuring some things due to supply chain issues. Minister, you are the minister for procurement as well as other things. Has difficulty of procurement been an issue for projects or operations apart from the pop-up emergency department?

Ms Orr: Procurement happens across all of the ACT government. While I hold the centralised policy, individual procurements are done by line agencies. So I probably cannot give you an answer on every single procurement in the government. What I can do is hand over to Mr Nicol, who can give you the broad overview of how we are finding it on a more strategic level.

Mr Nicol: I can give a strategic overview and then I might pass to Mr Bain, who will have more detailed on-the-ground knowledge. Generally, procurement chains around the world have been disrupted pretty significantly by this event. Particularly with products that were in high demand, we saw very significant competition for access to those products, particularly in the health space. There were stories of suppliers having difficulty even meeting existing contracts, particularly as their workforces were disrupted. We also had challenges in supply chains, particularly with products from China. It is the world's factory, so things like getting access to laptops et cetera were disrupted. It was not critical, but we did see delays in the delivery of some of those

types of products.

Generally, where services have been provided from local services, the disruptions have been less, but even then we have had to adjust. Businesses have had to adjust their own workforces et cetera. There might have been temporary disruptions in the provision of professional services while we set up new ways of providing those services. I would not classify those as significant or critical, but we did have to work differently in some cases with certain suppliers. With that broad introduction, I will pass over to Mr Bain, who might have some more detailed information on particular projects.

Mr Bain: A good example of the more immediate health-related procurement issues that we came across was hand sanitiser. To set the background, the way it was organised was that we split our procurement needs across two different categories. One was those that were directly health related to the COVID-19 response, coordinated under the coordinator-general's group, and the other was a more general supply chain management sort of response.

Hand sanitiser fell into the former category. It was controlled by the centralised group who looked at the whole-of-government demand and needs and then, with our assistance and some other contacts at a national level, went and sourced through different supply chains what hand sanitiser was required. As a result of that work, hand sanitiser was generally available to all of our territory buyers through our whole-of-government stationery contract. That has two providers that are national providers: COS and Winc. They have their own dispersal supply chains that they reorganised to try to meet demand right across Australia. From early March, though, they found that they were unable to meet our total request for orders, so we were looking at alternative sources.

So, in discussion with the coordination group that I referred to, Procurement ACT and the Emergency Services Agency determined that the agency would pursue an alternative whole-of-government source and coordinate the allocation and delivery of hand sanitiser products to ensure prioritisation to frontline workers. They struck a contract with a local Kambah supplier, Underground Spirits, for the production and supply of 24,000 litres of World Health Organisation-specified and TGA-approved sanitisers. About 12,000, so about half of that, was allocated to Canberra Health Services, and the other half the ESA and other agencies shared between them. The idea of that was that, rather than compete against each other for the same product, we took a much more coordinated view of establishing a single but diversified supply chain.

In parallel to that, we understand, the Education Directorate followed up on some previous cleaning tender activity to get in contact with some suppliers for another 17,000 bottles of hand sanitiser, which they have provided to their networks as well. We also have some standing orders that we have put in place to try to mitigate the risk of any particular supply chain falling over or being overstretched. That is where we went with the general coordination. As we came up against particular shortages or supply chain stretches, we tried to do it in a coordinated whole-of-government way rather than from a single agency perspective.

MRS DUNNE: I want to go back to the funding for community organisations and where it is being particularly directed. Are mental health community organisations able to access the community services funding, in particular veterans mental health organisations like Soldier On?

Ms Orr: There are a range of avenues—and I mentioned some of this in my opening statement—where groups can access parts. We might take it on notice as to the different avenues there are for different groups to apply for funding.

MRS DUNNE: Okay. If there are many avenues, perhaps there might be a place where there would be a simple road map or flowchart about how people access it, rather than having a bit of a lottery about whether they get funds.

Ms Orr: It is all published on the website, but we will take on notice what is there and where you can access information on it.

MRS DUNNE: Great, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, minister, and all your officials. You will receive a copy of the transcript. Please review it to make sure that it is accurate.

The committee adjourned at 12.08 pm.