



**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, 25 JUNE 2020

Secretary to the committee:

Ms Annemieke Jongsma (Ph: 620 51253)

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.

WITNESSES

ALTAMORE, MR ROBERT , Consultant, People with Disabilities ACT	411
BRIERLEY, MR ANTHONY , General Manager, Australian Hotels Association, ACT branch	406
CATT, MR GRAHAM , Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Business Chamber	389
CONWAY, MS CLARE , Manager, Housing Action Team, Woden Community Service	418
HOPKINS, MR MICHAEL , Chief Executive Officer, Master Builders Association ACT	401
SHANNON, MR CRAIG , Executive Director, People with Disabilities ACT	411
SPINKS, MRS KIM , Director, Housing and Community Engagement, Woden Community Service	418
TSIRIMOKOS, MR ARCHIE , Chairman, Canberra Business Chamber	389
WELLER, MR GREG , Executive Director, Housing Industry Association	396

Privilege statement

The Assembly has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting of these proceedings.

All witnesses making submissions or giving evidence to committees of the Legislative Assembly for the ACT are protected by parliamentary privilege.

“Parliamentary privilege” means the special rights and immunities which belong to the Assembly, its committees and its members. These rights and immunities enable committees to operate effectively, and enable those involved in committee processes to do so without obstruction, or fear of prosecution.

Witnesses must tell the truth: giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter, and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, it may take evidence in-camera if requested. Confidential evidence will be recorded and kept securely. It is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly; but any decision to publish or present in-camera evidence will not be taken without consulting with the person who gave the evidence.

Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 10.02 am.

TSIRIMOKOS, MR ARCHIE, Chairman, Canberra Business Chamber

CATT, MR GRAHAM, Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Business Chamber

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for joining us. I understand that a copy of the privilege statement has been sent to you both. Could you please confirm for the record that that is okay by you?

Mr Tsirimokos: I confirm.

Mr Catt: Yes, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Before we go into questions, do either or both of you have a short opening statement that you would like to give?

Mr Tsirimokos: We do not propose to give an opening statement. We thought that the time was better utilised by questions from the committee.

THE CHAIR: Very good. With regard to the ACT government's support for businesses during this time, since April there have been announcements on various things, including commercial rates. I am keen to hear how the commercial rates concessions have been received and, also, what more the ACT government could or should be doing to support businesses in the territory.

Mr Tsirimokos: I will go with the rates question first off and pass on to Mr Catt to answer the balance of the question. The issue of rates continues to be problematic for business and for landowners in the ACT. The considerations around rates, whilst understandable in terms of the approach, do not really help a landlord who is receiving zero rent from a tenant during a period. Having a proportionality principle apply means that the landlord has still got to fund those rates, notwithstanding anything else. The issue, fundamentally, is the issue that has been on the agenda and has been a concern for business for some time: that the commercial rates regime is impacting both on landlords and on businesses operating their businesses in the ACT. It is having a significant effect on vacancies. It is having a significant effect on property values down the track. As property values are going down and rates are staying ultimately the same, the effect on property values being slashed is significant.

THE CHAIR: What about the actual process for getting the rates concessions?

Mr Tsirimokos: The process is straightforward enough. There is a process. It is quite an administrative process. Landlords are able to achieve the outcome required but there is a lot of information required to back it up. It does not cover, for example, instances where tenants have just not paid rent and not reached an agreement. You have got to then prove that that is the case and that tenants have not paid the rent, in fact. The idea is that it is passed on to the tenant, but where tenants simply have not paid rent it does not really help with that issue, that aspect of it.

Mr Catt: I will touch a little on the commercial rates question and then I will move on to the second part of your question. The feedback from business has been that the

process is clear; it is online; it is workable. As Mr Tsirimokos has outlined, it is workable, though, when the circumstances permit it to work smoothly. There are a few issues that we hear from the tenant side of the equation. One is that there is a bit of lack of clarity around the burden of proof: what information needs to be provided by a tenant to a landlord, what form that should take and what is a reasonable degree? The other part of the process, as you are aware, is mediation through the COVID-19 business commissioner. The reports are good: that where things do go to mediation, the process is working; but there are still some grey areas, I think, and there are other issues that Mr Tsirimokos has outlined from a landlord perspective.

On the second part of the question, which was what else the ACT government could be doing, most feedback that we have from businesses probably acknowledges that the government has been pulling as many levers as it has been able to. One that it has not been able to pull, and the challenge for business in the ACT, is that it is very easy currently to look at what other jurisdictions are doing—it is very easy to make comparisons with what is happening in other places—and one of the things that we hear the most from our members is that what seems to be lacking from the mix is any kind of direct cash flow support.

More and more, particularly as we enter a restart phase and we are taking businesses out of hibernation and slowly back into a market, people are looking at the actual revenue hit that their business has suffered, looking at the extent to which government relief is assisting, looking at the gap and then looking at their cash flow. There are a range of small businesses who desperately need a cash flow injection. Certainly, some of the deferrals, waivers and other things that the government has been able to provide have been helpful and well received; but from many small businesses the feedback we are getting is that it just is not going to the gap between the revenues they can achieve and the costs they are still having to manage as they try to restart and get back into business.

THE CHAIR: You are indirectly referencing the \$10,000 grant in New South Wales?

Mr Catt: Yes, that is one example. There are other examples across jurisdictions. I think that the Queensland government recently announced another example, in the last few days, of a grant that would go directly to businesses that fitted certain criteria. It was not across the board; it was for small businesses that could demonstrate that they met certain criteria. Again, those related to revenues and cash flows specifically. There has been a recognition of the benefit of what has been done, but what we are hearing, from small business particularly, is that there is a lack of direct cash injection.

MS CHEYNE: My question relates to the easing of restrictions and the way in which this has been communicated to businesses. I am very curious as to what feedback Canberra businesses have given, whether they are hospitality or not, about the advice, as restrictions have eased, about things like patron numbers. We got feedback from the Chief Health Officer and the minister, from the weekend, that numerous businesses have not been compliant. I am curious as to whether that is due to businesses perhaps not understanding and whether there are some improvements that could be made in that space.

Mr Catt: There are quite a few questions in there. On the broader question of

communication, feedback from business has been that, once we had plans in place and a clear plan that showed the staged approach and dates for recovery, that was essentially what business had been asking for for some time.

We have made the point several times that in business you need to be able to plan; you need as much certainty as you can get so that you can plan your activities accordingly. We recognise that putting those plans in place, having clear time frames and putting forward very carefully what the plan was, when the restrictions would change and what those dates would be made a major difference for businesses to be able to make assessments of what the restrictions would be, how that fitted their individual circumstances and whether they were able to operate viably. That is the question for business: under a restriction, can we operate our business viably? Can we open the doors? Can we turn the refrigeration back on? Can we get staff back? Can we get people back to work? So it did make a difference, and we should recognise that that clarity of planning was important.

There are certainly different industry groups that had their own views on the contents of those plans, the number of patrons and the nature of restrictions. I know they have engaged with government and made those views known—particularly aspects of the hospitality sector.

On the other part of the question, there is a more complex question for businesses than for the public. It relates to the gap that in some cases appears to be there between the health directions that are in place and how those health directions are actually implemented in a business. That is the feedback we have got, particularly from hospitality operators and, to a lesser extent perhaps, some of the gym and fitness facilities: “We’re following a health directive to the letter but there seem to be guidelines, other instructions and other information that to some extent seem to be conflicting with those directives.”

Going to the minister’s comments with regard to business behaviour, I will make a few points in relation to that. First of all, it is probably worth noting the statistics the minister gave. There were about 3,800 visits across the weekend when restrictions had been lifted. I think the figure given was that 100 cases were seen where there was not compliance with the restrictions. An unspecified number of that 100 were felt to be businesses deliberately not complying, but we do not know what that figure is. It is probably worth keeping the perspective that, of 3,800 people, the vast majority did the right thing, and of the non-compliance cases it would seem that the vast majority were due to a communications issue or teething troubles with managing the lifting of restrictions.

The feedback we have had from some sectors and some businesses has been, again, a seeming conflict between the information and interpretation. The best way to explain it is this. If I run a restaurant and I have a lease that is 100 square metres, the normal thing a business will do is look at that, divide it by four and make a pretty clear interpretation that there are 24 people that can be permitted in that premise. Some of the reports that we were getting back were that Access Canberra and, in some cases, the police were measuring premises over the weekend and coming up with measurements that were different to the lease square meterage and therefore were dividing that by four and coming up with a different number, and in some cases that

would be a different number of patrons.

Really it comes down, again, to communication and clarity about what the size of the premises is, how many people are allowed into it and what measurement can be used. I know from talking to the Australian Hotels Association, for example, that every licensed premises in Canberra has a fire department assessment of its square meterage. That is the government's own assessment. We could use that assessment to determine the size of the premises for the sake of restrictions. There was some confusion there.

The other feedback related to patron behaviour. That has been challenging for some venues. The one that we hear the most about is the requirement that people be seated at all times. People have done their best to manage that and manage patrons, but that can be challenging. I think we can all appreciate how challenging that can be—walking up to the bar and not being able to stop and talk to someone.

Another thing we have heard back from businesses—and the minister did raise this in her comments—is questions about queueing. Again, from a business's perspective the conduct of patrons on the footpath outside their premises is not necessarily something that the business would see as their responsibility. Some of the examples that were cited related to the behaviour of patrons while queueing, and businesses not managing that behaviour.

To sum up, a range of things seemed to happen over the weekend. It is probably important to keep that in perspective. From that many visits by Access Canberra, we should have zero cases of non-compliance, but it would seem to be a relatively small number, given the shift over the weekend. There is still more work to do around clarity around the rules for some hospitality businesses particularly.

When we first lifted restrictions and we first saw hospitality operators, particularly, operating again with small numbers, the interactions between Access Canberra and those businesses were uniformly reported back as positive. There was a spirit of collaboration, working together and making things work. It is important that we see that spirit of collaboration continue and not move to a punitive sort of approach to compliance and fining, unless that is absolutely necessary and absolutely justified.

Mr Tsirimokos: The issue of space that Mr Catt just spoke about relates specifically to things like, “Do you count the kitchen? Do you count the toilets? Do you count the corridors?” There is some confusion around whether that is included. Most operators are taking the view that it includes everything—“It's the entire floor space which is my lease”—whereas there may be a contrary view taken by Access Canberra and the police.

MS LE COUTEUR: Given where we are now, what do you think the recovery trajectory will be in the ACT? Are we going to have the talked-about V-shape or do you think we go down to a lower level, or is it in the lap of the gods?

Mr Tsirimokos: I work as a lawyer in my day job. I work in property, essentially. My fear and my concern—and I think it is the concern of many of my clients—is that post-September, post-JobKeeper, post all these things, there will likely be an effect on the economy which takes us further down in terms of where it is travelling. The likely

recovery period, pretty much across the board, everyone believes is going to be long term. It is going to be years, not months. So it is certainly not going to be very V-shaped. It is unlikely to be U-shaped. It is going to be a lot longer than that. The concern is what happens post-stimulus. There is a concern that that is going to have a further impact on economies, not just in the ACT but across the country.

MS LE COUTEUR: You said “post-stimulus”. You are not concerned about what is happening in Victoria—whether something like that could influence Canberra before then?

Mr Tsirimokos: It will certainly influence decision-making in terms of relaxing the measures. That is understandable. That is natural as a reaction. There is a fear that there is going to be further lockdown. The impact of that on businesses and the economy, if that occurs—I think a general sentiment is that that would be disastrous.

Mr Catt: I concur with Mr Tsirimokos’s comments. Over the last few weeks we have run a series of meetings with industry associations and community groups that are members of the chamber. Our membership includes not just individual businesses but also industry associations and other groups. That message has been consistent, that concern. As we approach September there is a growing view that there will not be a continuation of JobKeeper or other stimulus measures for many sectors.

As I hinted earlier, when a lot of businesses are looking at their operations and seeing a gap between revenue generation and cost that they just cannot cover, there is a growing concern across just about all of those sectors. The terminology that is being used is that we are heading towards a cliff. As Mr Tsirimokos said, that will be a challenge for many small businesses, particularly, that do not have the financial wherewithal to manage that cliff. Then coming back from that drop may be a long, slow process over many years, rather than a V-shape and a quick bounce-back. That is something we are hearing consistently not just from business groups but from community groups as well.

MRS DUNNE: I want to go back to some of the messaging that Mr Catt talked about, over the last weekend, with the extended opening. On Friday we saw the government out encouraging people to go out, then by Monday we had another part of the government essentially rousing on business for not being compliant. Do you feel that there is mixed messaging from the government about what is allowable, and also mixed messaging across jurisdictions? A lot of Canberra businesses are in competition with businesses in New South Wales. Are you seeing a differential application of rules across jurisdictions that is having an impact on business?

Mr Catt: Yes. That is my short answer. The lifting of restrictions—I should stress that this is not unique to the ACT—drives confidence. That has been beneficial for business and beneficial for the community. But, as it has driven confidence, I think it is also fair to say it has driven increasing angst. Part of that angst is making comparisons with other places. So for businesses the growing number of questions about the differential application of rules in different circumstances crosses over. For example, if you are in hospitality, we know hospitality operators are looking at retail and questioning why certain practices seem to be applied and certain rules seem to be applied to them that are not being applied in retail. People are looking at jurisdictions

and asking why we are not doing everything the same, why there are different restrictions in different jurisdictions. Those questions become more pointed and less theoretical for an ACT operator because, when you are 15 kilometres or 10 kilometres away from being able to move into another jurisdiction and spend your money there and consume there, that becomes a real economic issue rather than a theoretical one.

I will be fair and say that this does not just relate to the ACT government; it relates to messaging that is coming from governments across Australia. Businesses are having to deal with the seeming disparity between jurisdictions and the seeming disparity between sectors. For example, I was speaking to someone yesterday who was saying that there were two branches of the same retailer and one of those branches in one suburb had someone standing outside the door counting the number of patrons going in and operating an exit and entry sign, while the same retailer but in a different store in a different suburb did not have the same controls in place. So there is a lot of confusion out there that relates to what the rules are and, when there does seem to be a disparity between different sectors or different jurisdictions, why that is the case.

It was very easy to run a rule that said stay home. It was very clear for everybody. The key tenets of the government—practise good hygiene, social distancing—still stand as rules of community behaviour, but there are more and more gaps between what appears to be restrictions and regulations that are in place in different places and for different sectors and that does create confusion. It also creates angst and, in some cases, anger, and we have seen that in some sectors over the past few weeks.

MRS DUNNE: Are you aware of businesses that are losing business to similar organisations across the border? I have been told that some of the gyms think they are losing business to Queanbeyan. Are you experiencing that?

Mr Catt: The major example is probably, again, in hospitality. It related to when gaming opened more quickly in New South Wales than in the ACT. That is obviously attractive to someone who likes to game or to sit and have a drink without having to order a meal. They were the major examples where we had people raise that issue: that it was a quick and easy drive to Queanbeyan to be able to do things, when in the ACT you had to be consuming a meal, and things like gaming or having a quick drink in a club were not available. They were probably the major issues when restrictions started to lift.

MR PETTERSSON: I have seen some industry groups in recent days come out in support of a permanent increase to JobSeeker of some level. Does your organisation have a view?

Mr Tsirimokos: We have not specifically addressed that. That is the short answer. That sounds at first blush to be unsustainable long term, but there may need to be some consideration of an extension of JobSeeker or, indeed, JobKeeper to ensure that the employment position is protected as much as it can be. When I alluded earlier to considerations post-stimulus, they are around concern about what that is going to mean for unemployment and what that is going to mean in terms of people's capacity to, essentially, live. If we have a larger proportion of our community in a poorer position, that is obviously going to be challenging long term for the entire community and society.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. That is, unfortunately, all we have time for today. We very much appreciate you coming before the committee again. Please keep us posted with any further developments.

WELLER, MR GREG, Executive Director, Housing Industry Association

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Weller, for joining this Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response here in the territory. As you are well aware, this is being webstreamed and recorded for transcription purposes. I understand a copy of the privilege statement has been sent through. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of that document?

Mr Weller: Yes, I do. I will just add, chair, that I have a colleague who I am hoping will join us this morning—one of our economics team, Angela Lillicrap. I believe she may be logging in, but she could be having a little bit of a problem with sound.

THE CHAIR: Yes, she is listed as being a participant on this Zoom chat, but we have no audio or video at this stage. We will keep an eye out for her.

Mr Weller: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Before we go to questions, do you have a brief update that you would like to give the committee?

Mr Weller: Thank you. I will keep it very short, as we have limited time and I imagine that the committee has plenty of questions. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to attend today. HIA is a national organisation representing the residential building industry. Our members, by number, are primarily licensed builders, but that covers trade contractors and associated professionals, such as architects, legal sector participants and consultants through to manufacturers of building products.

Like the rest of the economy, we have certainly been impacted and we have not been immune to the COVID pandemic. Our industry has been fortunate that, through the work that we have done with the national cabinet and with state and territory governments, we have been able to continue, on the whole, to operate but not without a certain amount of constraint and a lot of effort. We have been fortunate that we have been able to do that and we certainly hope that we have the measures in place so that continues as long as this pandemic does.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. First question from me: are you hearing much feedback about the DA and BA processing times at the moment?

Mr Weller: Yes. Yesterday I caught up with some members of the industry and with the directorate. We are certainly very pleased to see that the situation that has been one of the biggest issues facing the sector for quite some time—it has been reported widely in the meeting and, no doubt, many on the committee have had representations made to them from organisations or individuals—is the significant delays in the development approval process, which has held the industry back for quite some time.

We were very pleased that the government swiftly acted during the COVID pandemic to put more resources towards this. A message that we always put towards the government was that if we want to stimulate the industry, we cannot guarantee that fixing this problem will do that, but we can guarantee that it will not if this work is not

completed and applications remain sitting on people's desks. So, certainly, the feedback that we have received, and what we heard yesterday, was very positive. We give a lot of credit to the staff within ACTPLA who have borne the brunt of these problems for some time now and have now worked to be able to put this in place.

I guess it does ask the question about why it took such extraordinary circumstances for the adequate resources to be applied to this problem. It has been something, as I said, that we have known about for quite some time. There was an allocation in the budget made last year for additional staff, but that had an associated increase in fees for DAs, which is another cost for people in Canberra to get into a home. Then we had a significant period of waiting while additional staff were recruited and trained. We saw this year that, with the right impetus, it was a problem that was able to be solved very swiftly.

So I guess, going forward, our advice to the committee and the government is that we ensure that we do not find ourselves with this problem again, and that there are adequate resources, because if the industry is going to play a part in recovering and helping the economy out of the position we are in now, it has to be allowed to do so without unnecessary problems being put in its way.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CHEYNE: What else is needed at this time? Of course, you have just flagged the changes that have been helping things along, but what else is needed in the short term and especially in the longer term? We were just hearing from the Business Chamber that this is not a V-shaped recovery or even a U-shaped recovery. What are the necessary levers so that industry can continue to function at a decent level over the coming years?

Mr Weller: Certainly another measure that the government has put in place, which has been very positive and very welcomed by the industry, has been the reduction in stamp duty—not just for first home buyers but for broadening that out a lot further. That is obviously part of an ongoing government commitment. It does have an end date on it. We would urge the government to keep going with this reform; do not put an end date on it. It is something that is a long-term commitment of the government and, certainly, when we look at the government's figures in the budget—and obviously we are in a different set of circumstances now—the government has been forecasting significant increases in the combined stamp duty and residential rates collection. So, while our focus is on stamp duty, we believe that there is room within the budgetary measure to swing the pendulum back towards the stamp duty reduction. So we would certainly urge the government to keep going with that measure.

The commonwealth measures that were announced through the HomeBuilder program are a very positive step forward. Due to the price of land within the ACT, there are some risks there for the ACT that the proposition of building in New South Wales could be a little bit more attractive, with cheaper land around Queanbeyan, Googong and to the north. Obviously, with a cap of \$750,000 for a house and land package, the higher the cost of the land, the greater the limitation on the value of the house that can be built. It is difficult in a lot of new developments in the ACT to build a house and land package for under \$750,000. So I think that it is important that now it is over to

the ACT and the other jurisdictions to implement the measures around this program. There is a certain amount of detail that has been given by the commonwealth and it will now be up to the states and territories to interpret what the commonwealth package is, negotiate with the commonwealth and then implement it. So I think it is very important. We have had good dialogue with treasury so far, and it is important that we ensure that what is rolled out by the ACT absolutely maximises access to this program for the ACT community.

To the question a little more broadly, I touched on the process for assessing development applications. That has statutory time frames and it should be the absolute goal to meet those wherever possible. More broadly than that, from a strategic level, we have to look at the planning system and look at the things that are slowing developments down. It has rightfully been noted and agreed by planning ministers nationally that we cannot throw out planning systems and we have to ensure that, just for the sake of getting the economy going, we do not get poor outcomes, but I think, nonetheless, it is a very good opportunity to look at what we are doing and look at how we can potentially improve the system and make it more efficient.

MS LE COUTEUR: Are you finding that this is impacting your member base reasonably equally or are there some sectors that are doing okay and others not?

Mr Weller: I talk to a different business every day and we get very different answers, depending on where they are and what part of the market they are in. It is, indeed, very variable. I heard some of the comments from Mr Catt, earlier on, about the hospitality and tourism sector. In our industry, for someone considering building a house through to the final payment we are looking at roughly 30 to 40 weeks. So a lot of what is being built now was begun—the slab was being poured—before anyone had ever heard of COVID. We have a very long lead time into where we are now, so a lot of the problems for the industry could be coming a little bit further down the track. I guess that is one of our concerns.

Right now we are continuing to see work being done, and it, perhaps, gives the illusion that everything is fine in the industry, but as we talk to people, certainly a lot of them have holes in their books over the coming six months. As to your question, it really depends a lot on what part of the industry we are in. Some of the home builders and people in multi-residential work were continuing on when this started. For people at the end of smaller renovations, kitchens and bathrooms, their clients basically shut up shop and did not want anyone in their houses. So a lot of people doing smaller work, I think, felt immediate effects. Equally, as people are a little bit more relaxed about getting that work done, some of those builders are reporting that they are getting back to work a lot quicker, whereas with these jobs with the longer lead-in times we are probably going to see a lot of their problems a little bit further down the track.

There was a period of around three months where display villages were shut. That is certainly a very important tool for builders of new homes to be able to create sales and create interest in building. For other builders who may not be in the village, if people are out going to those villages on the weekend, looking at new suburbs, that is certainly positive for building a pipeline of work. So we had a big hole there, where people could not go to villages. Fortunately, we are back up now and that is continuing, but the sense I get from talking to a lot of builders is that some of it will

be caught up but a fair amount of it probably will not, and there is going to be this hole in the pipeline that was created by a couple of months when people were not able to look at homes and when there was also an impact on people's finances.

MRS DUNNE: Could I go back to the HomeBuilder program? Whilst I am very mindful of the point that you made, Mr Weller, about the cost of house and land packages in the ACT, are you aware of an adequate supply of land that would help people who were interested in the HomeBuilder program? Are the constraints in terms of time going to be a problem for people making decisions about building houses? In a sense, people are not going to say, "Oh, there's an incentive program. I'll go and build a new house." They would have been thinking about it and perhaps planning before, because there is quite a narrow time frame for the take-up of the program. What constraints do you see generally for the program but specifically in the ACT, apart from the actual cost of land?

Mr Weller: Obviously, one of the other constraints is the threshold in terms of incomes. Obviously, that threshold still represents a household that is reasonably well off by the standards of much of the community; but, nonetheless, when looking at a threshold of \$150,000 minimum for a renovation or a number of the houses at the higher end, that income threshold will certainly rule out a lot of households that may well have been interested in this incentive. That said, it is certainly a very good program. We are hopeful that it will encourage people into the renovation sector. While, as I said, there are some concerns about some suburbs, there certainly are other suburbs and developments in the ACT where people will be able to access this program. It has also got people talking about housing. Some of them later find out that they may or may not be eligible, but it is certainly creating interest and letting people know that the market is back operating.

In terms of your question about the time frames, there is detail missing at the moment for some of the projects on the way into this period as to what constitutes the commencement of work and, likewise, as it begins to wind up, what are the milestones. So I think the message strongly goes to my earlier point about the design of the program and the way it is rolled out from the ACT government—that they certainly take a case-by-case approach to applications to ensure that as many people as reasonably can get into this do.

Will it bring a lot of new people into building a home that may not otherwise? We do not know. Certainly, though, if there are people who were ready to go but were maybe wavering or who were getting close to being ready to go but were thinking a little further down the track, we are hopeful that this will ensure that some of those people make the decision to kick off or pull forward their projects to get that work happening over the next six months.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: Construction is one of the few industries that were able to continue whilst many industries had to cease to some degree. What experience did your members have in dealing with social distancing and public health audits?

Mr Weller: Obviously, for everyone in the community it was a new experience and

there were new things that we had to deal with. Not everyone got it right every time, but I guess it was fortunate that industry was able to step up fairly quickly and embrace the measures, because it was communicated to them that they were very fortunate to still be operating, and with that right would come some responsibilities.

I think that, in general, the industry did respond to that. From HIA's perspective, we put together a lot of resources to help the industry—as did other groups. We developed a program which is still operating now called Making Space on Site. That was the headline for it. We produced guides which we rolled out around the country for new housing, renovations, small commercial sites, display homes, home buyers and homeowners during building. So each of these little kits carried protocols and systems, as well as materials to put up on site.

So there was a very large education process of the industry, which was generally well received. We also interpreted all of these and produced, I think, Mandarin, Hindi, Vietnamese and Korean versions to try and make that message as broad as possible. This was supported by a QR code which builders would put up at the front of sites. Then contractors who came onto sites could go through a COVID site induction process after accessing that through their phones. That has been particularly successful.

We have had many thousands of businesses, representing many thousands more sites and contractors, accessing this across Australia. We have had some reasonable take-up in the ACT as well. We certainly put a lot of resources into trying to support the industry, particularly on residential sites, and I think they were well taken up by the industry. So we certainly feel that, from the perspective of protecting our workers and ensuring that the virus does not spread, generally, construction has held up to the things that we thought beforehand—that being mostly conducted outside in wider spaces and with the capacity, in most cases, to social distance, we really did not see any instances of transmission on building sites around the country. So if we find ourselves going into another phase, we again hope that construction is in a pretty good place to be able to manage those risks.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Weller. Unfortunately, that is all that we have time for today. There is, of course, much more that could be said or that needs to be said on this issue. Please keep the committee informed of any developments or any issues as they arise. We will be in touch if there are any follow-up questions that we have. Again, thank you very much.

Mr Weller: Thank you. Thanks to the committee.

HOPKINS, MR MICHAEL, Chief Executive Officer, Master Builders Association
ACT

THE CHAIR: Hello, Mr Hopkins. Thank you very much for joining this Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. It is good to have you here representing the ACT MBA. I understand that a copy of the privilege statement has been sent through to you. Could you please confirm for the record that you received that, and that you understand the implications of that document.

Mr Hopkins: Yes and yes. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Good, good. Mr Hopkins, do you have a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Mr Hopkins: Yes, I do; thanks, Mr Coe. First of all, I would just like to acknowledge that, over the last few months as we have been working in these extraordinary times, the effort by the ACT public service working with local industry has been exemplary, and I think it would be worthwhile the committee acknowledging the fantastic work that the ACT public service has been doing. I would particularly like to highlight Major Projects Canberra, which, early on in the crisis, facilitated a daily meeting with industry. So a whole range of industry associations, led by Major Projects Canberra with a whole range of other agencies of government, met for 30 minutes on a daily basis to talk about how both government and industry should be responding.

There was a particular focus at that time on managing safety. All up, I think those meetings ran over a four to six-week period. They are not running anymore; the discussions have now been absorbed into other regular formats where we meet with government, but that early action from Major Projects should be acknowledged and was particularly useful in managing safety. I would also like to point out that I think that the way that our local industry—our local construction industry in particular—managed safety in those early stages of the crisis was to a very high standard. It was similar to the response we saw to managing safety during the bushfires and managing the smoke impacts. It should be acknowledged.

The final point, before we get into Q and A, is that while we have done very well as a community to manage the health impacts, the economic impacts that are going to result from the government's decisions to shut down parts of the economy in response are only just beginning. The impact that we believe we are going to feel over the next few months and years should not be underestimated. I think that the response that we are seeing so far from governments collectively is still insufficient to support industry through the economic crisis that we are about to feel; and the ACT will not be immune from those economic impacts.

In the construction industry we have already seen a 6.4 per cent decline in jobs. That is nearly 1,300 people in the ACT construction industry that have lost their jobs since the peak of employment in February this year. We are continuing to see negative indications in our industry about the economic impacts, but I am sure that we will get into more of that in the Q and A.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hopkins. I am sure that the committee are unanimous

in our support for public servants, who all worked tirelessly over the last few months. The first question is from Mr Pettersson.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering, Mr Hopkins, what you thought the current state of the industry was and whether there is optimism or pessimism as Canberra moves forward.

Mr Hopkins: As I said just before, there have been around 1,200 or 1,300 jobs lost already, but our surveying of our members over the last few months indicates that, across the whole industry, members are concerned about the future pipeline of work. While many still have work that they are currently completing, there is a lot of nervousness and anxiousness about where the next job will be coming from and where that pipeline of work is coming in three, six or 12 months time.

Our industry at the moment is preparing itself and bracing itself for tougher times ahead. It is not impacting the whole industry uniformly. Larger businesses, larger builders, probably have more works in progress that will last them longer, but, for example, one of the really early impacts that we saw was from members doing small renovations, small maintenance jobs, where almost overnight they reported that their clients wanted to postpone or cancel small contracts. So that part of the industry suffered very early. The larger builders, I think, will manage for a little while longer before they start to see the real impacts.

MR PETTERSSON: I have a supplementary, chair. One of the often discussed markers for the financial recovery that we need to be aware of is when JobKeeper payments finish. I get that the construction pipeline is very much staggered and long term. Do you see that JobKeeper potential cut-off date as very telling for the future of construction in this town?

Mr Hopkins: I think that there is a lot of nervousness from construction businesses about what happens when JobKeeper finishes because, at the moment, there are lots of jobs being supported by that subsidy. We would really like some clarity from government as to whether there will be a future grant post-September for JobKeeper, in particular for apprentices. As you know, MBA runs a group training organisation. We currently train around 200 apprentices and we employ more than 50 of those ourselves. I know firsthand how reliant we are on JobKeeper to keep our apprentices working. We are strongly advocating to the federal government—and I would include the ACT government as well—that there be some long-term support for apprentices, particularly first-year apprentices, who, without some support will probably struggle to find employment over the next year or two.

MRS DUNNE: Mr Hopkins, I will ask a similar question to that which I asked for the HIA, and that is about the HomeBuilder program. What are the impediments that you see which will affect the rollout of the program and what do you think the government needs to do to make it as effective as possible?

Mr Hopkins: First of all, the HomeBuilder program has been very well received and it was also well received that it was made on the same day as the stamp duty cuts by the ACT government. I think it is important that both of those programs will work in conjunction with each other to help support and stimulate the residential sector. We

saw, the very next weekend, that display villages and real estate sales offices were much busier off the back of the HomeBuilder and the stamp duty cuts. I am not sure if you could distinguish which one of those may have generated the inquiry, but I think that both of them together have given a big boost in confidence to the residential sector.

Right at the moment what we need to actually implement that policy is the bilateral agreement between the federal government and all of the state and territory governments to implement the HomeBuilder scheme. We do not have that in place yet. We are receiving a number of inquiries from both consumers and builders about when that detail will be released. I know that the federal government has provided some frequently asked questions, but we actually need to see all the detail once that agreement is struck between the ACT government and the federal government so that we can answer the questions that we are getting. We know that there are lots of conditions around that program, which will mean that some people will not be eligible, but, on balance, the grant will have a very positive impact on the residential sector.

MRS DUNNE: Do you see that that will help people fill the gaps in their order books?

Mr Hopkins: For parts of the residential sector, yes—up until the end of December, when I think HomeBuilder is currently scheduled to run.

MRS DUNNE: Thanks.

MS LE COUTEUR: The MBA recently put out a whole bunch of initiatives that it would like to see happen. Given the Greens' views, one of the things that we are most interested in, and something you mentioned, is affordable housing. Do you want to say some more about what role that could play in a housing recovery?

Mr Hopkins: Certainly. There are a few parts to that. To be clear on what we have asked for, it was increased expenditure from the ACT government on social housing. That would also help the residential sector. We know that the ACT government already has a large number of pre-qualified residential builders that could deliver an increased program of social housing, if that is where the ACT government chose to direct some funding. Obviously, that will also provide a construction industry stimulus and it will provide a social housing benefit.

The other benefit that might not be as obvious in that one is that, because the government has pre-qualified a list of builders, it will help to support those good quality builders. It will help to support those builders that we need to support and sustain through this period—the ones that, after we recover, will deliver good quality buildings.

Another initiative that we put in that range of ideas was an energy efficiency and accessible housing fund. Again, that would go towards similar pre-qualified builders to encourage home owners or investors to upgrade the energy efficiency standards or the accessibility requirements of the existing housing stock.

MS LE COUTEUR: That would be a different bunch of people than the people who

would be eligible for HomeBuilder. Generally speaking, you are talking about a lot less money than the home building type renovations?

Mr Hopkins: That is right. It would capture, most likely, that under \$150,000 value of renovation, where the HomeBuilder currently kicks in.

MS LE COUTEUR: What about maintenance work? Housing ACT has a huge backlog of maintenance, I suspect, on the basis of complaints from their tenants. Is that another area that would be a useful part of stimulus?

Mr Hopkins: It certainly would. We have seen, in the initial \$25 million of small projects that were brought forward by government, a range of maintenance projects there for things like schools. That could easily be extended to cover maintenance of public housing as well.

MS LE COUTEUR: I am seeing a lot of path upgrades where I am. That is good for some, but the MBA would presumably like maintenance of buildings even more.

MS CHEYNE: Following on from that, Mr Weller talked about the government recently announcing some further changes to stamp duty, or lack thereof, that will be applied to different builds, and wanting the government to continue down that path. Is that something that the MBA would also support?

Mr Hopkins: Absolutely. We know that the ACT government was working through a 20-year tax reform program, anyway. Reducing or eliminating stamp duty was part of that program. Now that it has been announced, we think that it could be made permanent. I believe that the government has committed to reducing it for only 12 months, but given that it is in line with the government's general tax policy, anyway, it would be good to see that extended and even made a permanent feature of the ACT tax regime.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hopkins, a final question from me: with regard to certificates of occupancy and other issues right at the tail end of construction, are you seeing any issues or problems there with regard to ACT government processing?

Mr Hopkins: We have worked with government over the last couple of months to help put in place some short-term fixes to that part of the process. I heard your earlier questions to Mr Weller about the DA process. Certainly, we have seen an acceleration of development approval time frames, which has been very welcome. As we know, approvals are just one part of the process; you also need to get through the unit titling process at the end of the process, and that is often when the developer or the builder is at peak cash flow. It is a critical step that needs to occur before settlement of the units, and it can be a very intense and stressful time.

We have been working closely with that part of government to make sure that, on a case-by-case basis, individual applications are managed. There could also be an improvement to that system overall, once we are through this, to try and make that a more efficiently run system. At the moment, again, hats off to the ACT public service for making sure, on a case-by-case basis, that those applications are managed as well as they can be.

THE CHAIR: What about with regard to valuations and the banks' propensity to lend? Are there any issues that have emerged or been exacerbated post COVID?

Mr Hopkins: Certainly, in terms of both developer finance and purchaser finance. One of the barriers to our economic recovery is how well the banks support local businesses and continue to lend for housing and unit purchase. That is certainly a key concern of our members and we are hearing about problems there. Again, we will try and work directly with the financial institutions to make sure that that is managed as smoothly as possible.

THE CHAIR: Specifically, what about the valuations? Are they holding up?

Mr Hopkins: From what we hear, so far, but, Mr Coe, I do not have a whole lot of property evidence to report on that today.

THE CHAIR: Okay. That is all that we have time for. Do you have any further comments?

Mr Hopkins: I want to add one further point that we did not get to during questioning, around our capital works program. Ordinarily, by now the ACT government would have released its budget, including a four-year capital works program and a 12-month funded program. Because the budget has been delayed, that is leaving a gap in the pipeline of work for many of our commercial and civil contractors. It is becoming quite an urgent concern of those members, given that they will soon be finishing projects they are currently on, and in a normal year they would have a clear pipeline regarding where the next tender opportunity was coming from. If the budget is going to continue to be deferred, some consideration needs to be given to releasing a component of the capital works program to give those businesses some certainty about the tender opportunities over the next six to 12 months.

THE CHAIR: That makes sense. That concludes this first session of today's hearing. Thank you, Mr Hopkins. A copy of the transcript will be sent through. We will resume at 11.30.

Hearing suspended from 11.08 to 11.32 am.

BRIERLEY, MR ANTHONY, General Manager, Australian Hotels Association, ACT branch

THE CHAIR: Mr Brierley, welcome to this hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. It is great to have the AHA with us. I understand that you have been sent a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you received it and that you understand the implications of that document?

Mr Brierley: Yes, I have received it and I understand the implications of that document.

THE CHAIR: Very good; thank you. Before we go to questions, do you have a statement that you would like to make to the committee?

Mr Brierley: I do not have an opening statement in particular. I was circulated some questions that would come up, and I have prepared some responses to those. I am happy to proceed on that basis.

THE CHAIR: The first general question that I have is with regard to the restrictions that are currently in place and whether, in particular, the four-square-metre rule will be viable as a mid-term measure.

Mr Brierley: As a mid-term measure, definitely not.

THE CHAIR: For the foreseeable future?

Mr Brierley: If it was to hang around in the mid-term, that would definitely not be financially viable. It remains limiting at the moment for the larger venues that are able to make use of 100 people per space with sufficient social distancing under the one-in-four rule, but some of the smaller bars, restaurants and cafes are still having a pretty difficult time with it. It limits a business's revenue to about 25 per cent because it limits that business's occupancy to about 25 per cent.

On the other side of the ledger, a lot of expenses have come back at 100 per cent. That is the problem here. Electricity has come back at 100 per cent; rent has come back, maybe not at 100 per cent but at a much higher number; wages have come back at 100 per cent where the staff are not covered by JobKeeper. I do not mean to diminish the financial support that the ACT government has already provided, because it has been considerable and welcomed, but the best financial support, moving forward as quickly as the health situation allows, is to move to a social distancing density of one person per two square metres.

South Australia announced earlier in the week that they are going that way. Tasmania announced it yesterday. Western Australia announced that they have gone beyond one in two. The Northern Territory never even went there in the first place. I think that is the next step. As soon as the health situation allows, we should move to that level.

MS CHEYNE: I have a supp on that. The difference with all of those jurisdictions that you have just outlined is that they all have, or have had, pretty hard borders.

Mr Brierley: Yes.

MS CHEYNE: We do not, with New South Wales and Victoria, and Victoria has just recorded—a press conference is on right now—33 new cases today. That spike there is continuing. One person per two square metres sounds very attractive, but is it really the time for us, given our geographical location and the fact that we are heading into the school holidays, to do that? Is it, perhaps, something that we could move to, if things continue to go okay for us, with a bit more time?

Mr Brierley: It is certainly something that we should move to as soon as the health situation allows. I am not advocating that we do it while it is dangerous or there is too much risk there. I suppose it would be good if the public health advice or modelling around it was made public so that we could understand the point in time that we could move to one in two. I also note that, apparently, we are not being guided by what other jurisdictions are doing. If New South Wales and Victoria do not move to one in two, apparently that should be no barrier for the ACT doing it, if the situation here is safe enough to warrant it.

MS CHEYNE: My more substantive question is regarding businesses' ease of understanding the changes to restrictions, which was on the list of questions you received. We talked earlier with the Business Chamber about some of the compliance measures over the weekend, and that there seems to be some confusion between businesses and Access Canberra, and even the police, about what part of a venue's floor space contributes to deciding the one person per four-square-metre space. Do you have any views on that or on how that could be managed better?

Mr Brierley: Understanding the health directions has not been easy at all, particularly over the last weekend. In the most part it was not deliberate. Most venues that may have exceeded their capacity did so because of a genuine misunderstanding of the rules. Those venues had applied the one-in-four-square-metre rule across their entire tenancy rather than spaces within their tenancy. I would make the point in defence of those venues that the public health directions went live or were published a few hours before midday last Friday, so it did not give them a whole lot of time.

I was not aware, as of midday last Friday, that there was advice on the ACT government's COVID-19 website that said what needed to be included as part of that one-in-four-square-metre rule. Certainly, that advice is on the website now, and the industry has been made aware of it. By and large, I believe that there was a genuine misunderstanding around what needed to be counted in the one in four and what could not be counted. Last weekend has happened, and I think there should not be that confusion over the coming weekend.

MS LE COUTEUR: I am interested in how your patrons are relating to the new rules. Are they happy to obey them? Are you finding that people are thinking, "I don't know that I want to start going out again"?

Mr Brierley: I think last weekend showed that people are pretty happy to be out, or part of the community is very happy to be out. There are some elements of patron behaviour that are difficult for a venue to manage. There is a requirement that patrons

be seated to consume alcohol. Venues can ask and ask, but it does not mean that a patron will sit down. We all have habits in this respect. Some people have the habit of standing while they drink and, no matter how many times they sit down, 30 seconds later, naturally, they will get up again. So there is a role for patrons in this as well.

Another one relates to social distancing outside the venues. Because venues have a constrained capacity, we are seeing more queuing outside, waiting to get in. Under the public health directions it is not necessarily the venue's responsibility to enforce social distancing within the queue. They can try to, and they are trying to, but it is very difficult to enforce and ensure that patrons who arrive as part of a group are remaining socially distant in that queue, particularly when, like last Saturday, it is raining and it is cold.

Patrons are happy to be back. The ones that were out last Friday were happy to be back; but, as with everything in this, there are challenges that remain.

MS LE COUTEUR: There is another challenge that I am interested in. Do you think that this will have an impact on the number of hotel projects that have been planned and are in the pipeline? Will they stop?

Mr Brierley: The AHA is doing some work on this at the moment. I have been preparing it over the last couple of days. Intuitively, I suspect that there will be an impact on that supply pipeline. That affects not just the tourism and hospitality industries but the number of people employed in our industries over the future and the construction industry as well, and the flow-on costs from that.

I would be happy to take that question on notice, because we are doing a bit of work on it, and I could provide an answer to the select committee in more detail, if that is appropriate.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MRS DUNNE: Could you elaborate a little more on the issues that arose on the weekend regarding conflicting views about what useable floor space was?

Mr Brierley: The main one was that venues took their tenancy size. They pay rent on an area that might be 360 square metres. They divided that by four and got 90, so they thought they could have 90 patrons. A more appropriate approach is to exclude the back-of-house areas that patrons do not access, to exclude the kitchen and the bar service area. You are then left with the areas in which patrons can move around. That was the number one difficulty over the weekend.

I think that we saw some pretty unfortunate consequences of that misunderstanding. Authorised persons under the Public Health Act entered licensed premises and measured them on Saturday night. I was also advised that they instructed patrons to leave because venues had made a genuine mistake and were over capacity. I think that that was pretty heavy-handed for an honest mistake. In particular, with measuring venues on a Friday and Saturday night, there is no reason why it cannot happen on a Tuesday morning. It really ruins the vibe of the venue when police start getting out laser pointers or tape measures and assessing the veracity of what the venue is saying

with regard to their occupancy size.

I think we have addressed it for this coming weekend, and we will expect venues to have a drawn plan of their space, not necessarily to scale but with measurements identified. I hope that that is enough so that we do not need to see venues being measured during those peak periods. Hospitality businesses are already doing it tough enough. Hopefully, that solves it.

The other problem in this regard is that we have to be clear about the distinction between strong public health advice and what, as Paul Keating would say, is l-a-w. From my reading—and I may be incorrect—of the public health directions, there is nothing prohibiting a buffet from occurring at the moment. The AHA received advice that a buffet was prohibited. I cannot see where that happens. I cannot see how that interpretation can be made from the public health directions; but businesses are receiving this advice, and I suspect that it could be without a legal basis.

I am also concerned about reports that there is an expectation that tables within a venue are 1.5 metres apart. In the public health directions that is not necessarily a legal requirement. A business is required to consider whether that is possible. They are not required to ensure that the tables are 1.5 metres apart. It is very difficult, when we speak about compliance, to expect the industry to be compliant with guidelines, because guidelines change. I think that the industry should be expected to be compliant with the public health directions because that is the law. That is what changes at designated points in time, and the industry can stay on top of it. If the industry is expected to be compliant with guidelines on a government website that can change as fast as anyone wants them to, we will continue to have conversations about a lack of compliance, and I do not think that it is fair.

MRS DUNNE: With respect to irregular or inconsistent application, it was reported to me over the weekend that some pubs, as a generic term, had their pool tables open and others had them covered. Is there advice about pool tables? You have spoken about buffets; is there advice about pool tables, and what is your understanding about pool tables?

Mr Brierley: The AHA sought some advice about pool tables. We were told that people can play pool. They can't hold a beer while they hold the pool cue, obviously, because they would need to be seated to be drinking beer. It is probably best practice to wipe down or clean pool cues and balls between uses, but there is nothing in the public health directions actively prohibiting people from playing pool.

MRS DUNNE: The venues that had their tables covered probably did that from an abundance of caution or—

Mr Brierley: I would suspect that that is the case.

MRS DUNNE: They preferred not to have to be responsible for the wiping down of the balls, the cues and that sort of thing between games.

Mr Brierley: Yes. I think that those venues that had them covered could uncover them. They could allow their patrons to play pool. If they provided sufficient products

for the patrons to clean the pool equipment before using it then that would also be fine.

MR PETTERSSON: We have discussed this previously: could you provide an update on hotel occupancy rates in the ACT and how that is tracking? The reason I ask is that, as I am sure most people are aware, the airwaves are starting to get filled with ads for domestic tourism. I was wondering whether that was flowing through to the ACT.

Mr Brierley: I do have some statistics at the top of my emails, if I can find them for you. In the week ending last Saturday, occupancy in the ACT was a tad under 40 per cent. In the rolling month to last Saturday, the occupancy over that period was 29 per cent. It is a lot lower than where it would ordinarily be, particularly because that month had two sitting weeks in it, and a sitting week may sometimes generate occupancy rates of 90-plus. So there is still a world of hurt. There is a lot of work to be done to bring tourists back to the ACT at a time when it is safe to do so. I think we are all aware that right now may not be the safest time to bring people, particularly from Victoria, to the ACT. I know that some hotels are speaking with guests who have made bookings and asking those guests to reconsider coming to Canberra, if they are travelling from Victoria. It is a really difficult one because, while we want the industry to get back up on its feet and we want people in beds again, we do not want them if they are coming from somewhere that is more dangerous than here.

THE CHAIR: I have a final question. In terms of the immediate advice that the government should take on board for this weekend, is there anything in particular that is really vital to be sorted out before tomorrow night?

Mr Brierley: I do not think that we need to be measuring venues tomorrow night. If authorised persons suspect that a venue may be over its limit, the best approach would be to count the number of people in the venue, record that and return at a later point in time to measure the venue. I understand that authorised persons are very close to giving out fines. We have communicated that to our members. We have communicated what is expected of them with regard to the one in four. I also think that we need to stop expecting venues to be compliant with things that are not the law. We need to take a black-and-white legal approach to this with regard to fines. If a venue is breaking the law then taking action against them may be warranted. If a venue is breaking a guideline then a stern conversation should suffice.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. That is all that we have time for today. It was a pleasure to hear from you again. Please keep us posted as the situation unfolds. A copy of the transcript will be sent to you in the coming weeks.

Mr Brierley: Thank you.

ALTAMORE, MR ROBERT, Consultant, People with Disabilities ACT
SHANNON, MR CRAIG, Executive Director, People with Disabilities ACT

THE CHAIR: Mr Altamore, it is a pleasure to have you with us, representing People with Disabilities ACT. I understand that a copy of the privilege statement has been emailed to you. Could you please confirm for the record that you received that and that you are okay with the implications of that document?

Mr Altamore: Yes, I have received the statement and I am fine with its implications. Is my colleague Craig also with us?

MS CHEYNE: He is about to be.

THE CHAIR: Very good. Hello, Mr Shannon. Welcome to this public hearing. I understand that a copy of the privilege statement has been sent to you. Could you please confirm for the record that you are okay with that document?

Mr Shannon: Absolutely; totally.

THE CHAIR: What are your positions in the organisation?

Mr Shannon: I am the executive director of People with Disabilities ACT, and Mr Altamore is with me as the author of the submission on behalf of our organisation.

THE CHAIR: Mr Shannon or Mr Altamore, do either of you have a brief opening statement that you would like to make before we go to questions?

Mr Shannon: Mr Altamore will be leading our submission this morning and I will be supplementing anything he has to say. I believe he has a statement that he would like to commence with.

Mr Altamore: I do have a statement. People with Disabilities thanks the committee for the opportunity to be with you this morning to present the perspective of people with disabilities on the current COVID-19 health emergency.

I will tell you a little bit about our organisation. Our organisation is the peak body for people with disabilities in the ACT. We are a disabled people's organisation, as we are owned and run by people with disabilities. We advocate for people with disabilities and contribute to discussions by bringing our lived experience of our disabilities to the discussion of public issues, such as the current one we are having in relation to COVID-19.

People with Disabilities have participated in a number of meetings relating to COVID-19 with ACT government officials and with the community and disability sectors. We have provided comment on the ACT priorities under the draft commonwealth management strategy for COVID-19 and people with disabilities, and we provided comment on a draft health department document dealing with triage planning. We have also provided a submission to this committee, which is submission 6, for your reference.

I want to deal briefly with the four issues mentioned in your email invitation that you might ask me about. That is my opening strategy. I would like to start dealing with the four issues mentioned in your email.

THE CHAIR: If it is all right with you, Mr Altamore, we might go to questions from the committee because they may well have evolved slightly since then.

Mr Altamore: Okay, that is fine.

THE CHAIR: The first question is from Ms Cheyne.

MS CHEYNE: My questions do follow along those lines, Robert, so that should dovetail nicely. My opening question is about access to personal protective equipment for people with a disability and their carers, how that has changed over time and whether the support in that area is adequate at the moment and will be adequate in an ongoing way.

Mr Altamore: As committee members will recall, this issue was very prominent in earlier hearings and was the subject of recommendation 12 in your interim report. In his response, Mr Barr indicated that there had been improvements in the area of access by people with disabilities and their carers and supporters to personal protective equipment and sanitisers. People with Disabilities ACT acknowledge that improvement, but we are also aware through our contact with people that the situation is still haphazard and that there is an absence of a clear pathway whereby people with disabilities can have a clear pathway to access this equipment, particularly as individuals. There is an absence of clear messaging on this topic from the ACT government.

Those are the two areas which we believe need to be addressed—that is, people with disabilities need a clear pathway to access sanitisers in various forms and the government needs to be clear on its messaging. To give an example, although we can now get readier access to sanitisers, with respect to things like methylated spirits and disinfectants, which are used in sanitising and are important in sanitising, access to these, particularly methylated spirits, is still problematic.

MS CHEYNE: Robert, in terms of that messaging from the ACT government, what is the messaging that would be preferable?

Mr Altamore: To go back to my comment, people with disabilities need to have a clear pathway. They need to know, for example, that if you need sanitiser or PPE, you ring this number or go to this place to get it. They need to know the “how to” regarding accessing sanitisers and PPE for themselves and for their carers and family members.

Mr Shannon: Can I add that there needs to be a clearer distribution framework. It may have some impact on the competitive cost base associated with this area. I think it has been made a bit worse because of the lack of clear transparency over suppliers or best pathways.

Mr Altamore: One of the issues that one of our member organisations raised with

me—that was Women with Disabilities ACT—was that people with disabilities were paying high personal costs for personal protective equipment. In the early days, when sanitiser was really scarce, they were paying high personal costs for that.

MS CHEYNE: That is very useful; thank you. I apologise for calling you Robert and not Mr Altamore before; of course, we have met.

Mr Altamore: That is okay. Tara and I know each other through common community involvements.

MS CHEYNE: Indeed.

MS LE COUTEUR: First off, Mr Altamore, you mentioned methylated spirits and I was wondering are you still doing do-it-yourself sanitisers or what is the methylated spirits needed for?

Mr Altamore: For example, some people are amputees and they need to be very careful about drying their toes on their remaining foot, and methylated spirits is used for that. It is a drying agent; but because of the panic over sanitising and things which were perceived to be sanitising agents, that got caught up in the rush.

MS LE COUTEUR: I was worried that you were still at the stage that you were having to try and do do-it-yourself sanitisers, because I am aware that people have been looking to metho for that.

Mr Altamore: Yes.

MS LE COUTEUR: Mr Altamore, are you aware of the differences in support between the disabled sector and the aged-care sector and, if so, do you have any comments about that?

Mr Altamore: Yes, I have comments about the difference in support between the aged and disability sectors. In these comments I am not seeking to prioritise one sector over another. Both have really severe needs. However, I need to make the comment that in areas such as access to PPE and sanitiser and other areas, COVID-19 supports for the aged-care sector have been rolled out far quicker and far more effectively than they have for the disability sector. As I said, sanitisers were one example.

Another example was in hotline services for people who do not have access to the internet. There was set up a COVID-19 hotline for aged people and we raised the issue in our submission that there needs to be a COVID-19 phone service hotline for people with disabilities. We believed that that could have been very easily done by adding another option to the ACT Office for Disability current phone answering set-up, whereby you press 1 for the NDIS, 2 for the Office and maybe 3 for a hotline.

Mr Shannon: We are aware that it created a scenario in this space where a person with disability may be treated differently in the aged-care sector. If they were not in the aged-care sector, the same person, they are being perceived to be dealt with with differential treatment.

MS LE COUTEUR: I understand that the ACT has a COVID disability strategy. Has that been rolled out and has it addressed any of these problems?

Mr Altamore: If I could start with that, ACT PWD welcomed the strategy. However, we are very disappointed to know that, even as of today, the plan which underpins the strategy has not been seen nor have there been the key investments in areas such as health, hospitals, education and other areas which would fit under such a strategy if it were being properly implemented.

The strategy is there. As a document it is fine but there is nothing beneath it. There is no plan and because there is no plan there is no investment and no money is flowing to the areas for people with disabilities where money, where investment, is needed to address the COVID-19 issues.

MS LE COUTEUR: The disabled people and their carers are the people who are having to make the personal investments, or it is just not happening?

Mr Altamore: It is just not happening. The strategy is there on the website. There is a reference to a plan but no plan as far as we can tell, as far as I have been able to find out—and I stand corrected—and because there is no plan a number of key investments that could have and should have been made or might have been or have been made in other jurisdictions have not happened in Canberra.

MS LE COUTEUR: I can see a recommendation coming up there.

Mr Altamore: Yes. We would like the committee to follow up with the ACT government as to what is happening to the underpinning plan for the COVID-19 strategy and what is happening with the investments in areas required by the plan.

MS LE COUTEUR: I strongly suspect that, as I said, there could be a recommendation coming up here. I am a bit gobsmacked at this stage.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you, Mr Altamore and Mr Shannon, for appearing today. I want to touch on some of the issues that have been raised by other disability groups. I suppose that it is a bit of a moot point at the moment because we have not had a big spike in cases. I refer to the access that people with disabilities expected to have to COVID-related health services and what barriers you saw as possibly arising in that space and that we have to be alert to in a possible second wave, as they like to call it. Are there particular issues that you think should be addressed by health services to ensure that people with disabilities get equal access to COVID-based health facilities?

Mr Altamore: Thank you for the question. First of all, just to go back to the COVID strategy for a moment, one of the areas in which we are disappointed is the lack of a coherent response on the health and disability interface from ACT Health. That is an area which needs attention. In other words, we do not know what Health has planned to address access to health services. We are aware that people with disabilities are having trouble with telehealth services, which are not always appropriate and the best option for them, particularly where a person has a severe disability and has trouble communicating and the best means of communicating is personal communication.

To get on now to your question, you are referring, I think, to the health planning document which was released very early and on which PWD ACT provided comment. I refer you to our submission and, in particular, to our references to pages 9 and 10. If you look at page 10 on its own, it appears unobjectionable because Health say that they will not adopt an approach to triaging health services which involves discrimination. However, various comments on page 9 of the draft document open the door to the prospect that if our health services are under stress by a substantial COVID-19 second wave and health services are prioritising treatments, there are various comments on page 9 of the draft which open the door to them adopting discriminatory approaches and saying, let us say, “We will give a ventilator to a person but we won’t give it to this other person who is a paraplegic and who has breathing difficulties.” They will make a discriminatory value judgement which does not recognise that all our lives are equally of value.

Can I just reiterate on this: on about 15 April a number of disability groups put out a strong statement on this matter, which PWD ACT strongly endorses. That is in our submission to which I refer committee members.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering if someone could speak to the experience of social isolation that many Canberrans with a disability experienced over the past few months and will probably continue to experience for a period and what can and should be done to address it?

Mr Altamore: Could I speak to it first, please, and then I might invite Craig to speak? The problem with COVID-19 for people with disabilities is that many of us are already strongly isolated and COVID-19 has this potential to increase that isolation because people do not call on you as much because: (a) they fear for themselves or (b) they do not want to hurt you. A person with disability could be more stuck in their home.

There is also the other problem—and I have found this on one or two occasions—that people who are not disabled lack confidence in the ability of a person to speak to social distancing. They say, “Because you’re blind you can’t see the spots on the floor; so you can’t go into the shop.” That is another area where people once thought you were competent to do things that they now do not think you are competent to do.

Basically, COVID-19, if not correctly dealt with, has the potential to substantially increase social isolation for people with disabilities. We have to really make sure that the services and supports are in place so that people with disabilities do not become socially isolated. We are aware of some instances where people who are used to familiar service providers coming to see them now find that that person is not coming in every Tuesday to take them out or something like that. That is proving very disorienting.

Mr Shannon: We would certainly be worried about people falling through the cracks when there is a lot less assistance available for the average person to be scrutinised or overseen. Certainly, in general terms, we are very happy with the ACT government’s engagement with the sector in regard to this issue. We understand that it has been a struggling exercise for most people to wade their way through this in the last few

months. I think, collectively, there has been a fair bit learned and derived out of this process.

I suppose, if I want to flag one issue of concern going forward, it would certainly be a concern for us that when a vaccine became available, in the midst of its availability, there then came a heated debate over the process of distribution and the prioritisation issues. The sooner that matter is dealt with in advance, I think, would be to the benefit of everybody. We would hate to see it like a similar thing to a scramble for PPE equipment—the moment a vaccine becomes available and debates over who should be getting it and what priority order. I think that the sooner that process could be looked at, that would be of benefit to everybody.

Mr Altamore: If I could just come in here, the issue for us is that ACT Health, in dealing with issues such as access to treatment and access to vaccines, has to adopt a human rights approach which values the lives of all our people, not a triage medical approach. Unfortunately, what we have seen to date from Health has been more a medical model rather than a human model, which is the model we would like to see.

THE CHAIR: A final question from me, which might be best answered by Mr Shannon: with regard to the actual organisation and how you are able to fare during these times with increased advocacy and increased need, how is the organisation positioned financially and with other resources to do what needs to be done?

Mr Shannon: It is a very difficult time, particularly with the change in the budget cycles, the transparency on funding issues going forward and the fact that everybody has an increased demand. It is a concern for this organisation, particularly as there are a lot of people at the table, I guess, in regard to the funding situation in this space.

We obviously put in a budget submission and a lot of that has obviously gone into the ether, potentially as a result of what has happened. We would be concerned that the funding by the ACT government of the sector generally should actually be considered for increasing, not decreasing, as the demand has been fairly substantial in impact terms to a lot of organisations in this space. We have all had to reform both organisational approaches and the way that we even interact with our own members in a financially detrimental way in a lot of cases; but yes, it is certainly an issue that is of great concern to us going forward, particularly as the budget cycles get more clarity to them.

THE CHAIR: Just as a ballpark figure, how much do you get from the ACT government on an annual basis?

Mr Shannon: I must admit I do not have those figures in front of me at the moment.

THE CHAIR: That is all right.

Mr Shannon: There are special projects that get specific funding from time to time.

THE CHAIR: I understand. There are numerous buckets. I understand that.

Mr Shannon: That has been an issue, though, because we have obviously had some funding for a number of things that have been affected in capacity and implementation terms with COVID-19—the fact that we could not even engage effectively with some of our own marketplace. There may be some issues going forward, I guess, in acquitting or reconciling some of those things as a result of the impact of the virus itself. It is a watching brief for us at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Altamore and Mr Shannon. A copy of the transcript will be sent through to you. Please review that in the coming weeks to confirm that it is accurate. We very much appreciate the evidence that you have provided today.

Mr Shannon: Thanks for having us. I appreciate it.

Mr Altamore: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

SPINKS, MRS KIM, Director, Housing and Community Engagement, Woden Community Service

CONWAY, MS CLARE, Manager, Housing Action Team, Woden Community Service

THE CHAIR: It is a pleasure to have OneLink with us today providing evidence. I understand a copy of the privilege statement has been sent through to you. Could you please confirm for the record that you are okay with the privilege implications of that document?

Mrs Spinks: Yes, absolutely. Just to let you know, I have Clare Conway with me as well. If she has to say the same thing, then—

THE CHAIR: Yes, if Ms Conway could contribute as well, that would be good.

Ms Conway: Yes, thank you.

THE CHAIR: That is all good by way of the privilege statement?

Ms Conway: Yes, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Before we go to questions, does either or both of you have a brief opening statement that you would like to give to the committee?

Mrs Spinks: Yes. Part of my role as Director of Housing and Community Engagement at Woden Community Service is to oversee OneLink. For most of this, though, I am going to hand over to Clare. She has been doing some really good work in relation to the COVID-19 response and will be able to give you some really detailed responses to anything that you ask. I am going to hand over to Clare for the opening statement.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Ms Conway: I just want to, first of all, say thank you very much for having us. It is really nice to be provided with an opportunity to speak to the work that we do generally but also the work that we have undertaken in response to COVID-19 in partnership with the government. One of the challenges that OneLink works with all the time but has certainly been, I guess, exacerbated during COVID-19 is that we are not often given right of reply around some of the feedback that the sector or others receive around us. So it is really nice to be offered an opportunity and a platform to speak to the work that we do and some of the complexities around that broadly but also specifically in response to COVID-19.

THE CHAIR: The first question from me is: what aspects of the services that you offer have been stretched over the last three or so months?

Ms Conway: Almost every aspect of service delivery has been stretched. That being said, in terms of ways of working and the daily delivery of services, it has been very much business as usual for OneLink staff because our role is to work in that space of crisis response and assess what needs people have and what potential responses might

be available. We have seen an increase in demand but also, I guess, an increase in the need for time to be spent with clients to understand their presenting needs to really complete a robust assessment and to understand the impact of COVID-19, or not, on their presentation.

A perpetual struggle for OneLink as the centralised intake and referral service is blockages in referral pathways, in that there are no vacancies because emergency and transitional or crisis accommodation is all full. What do we do with people who have a need for that but there are no vacancies that we can immediately refer to?

COVID-19 had really quite a profound impact on how we needed to manage and respond to people who, ordinarily, we would be able to work with around holding until a vacancy came up. Oftentimes, that might be in the context of asking them to explore other resources that usually would have worked. For example, have you got friends that you can stay with? Have you got family that you can stay with?

We were really quite conscious that in asking people to explore avenues like that we would actually be asking them to breach a public health direction in terms of staying in overcrowded accommodation, being closer to people than they needed to, moving between locations unnecessarily. That definitely became a lot more difficult with the onset of COVID-19 and we actually had experiences where clients, particularly families with young kids, who had been couch surfing, were all of a sudden told, "You can't stay here anymore because we're worried about the virus."

In terms of resources being stretched, I think that was felt across the entire sector. One of the really valuable resources, I guess, that OneLink had, in terms of being a centralised intake service, was that we had quite an aerial view of which resources were being stretched, where the gaps were, which gaps were broadening with the onset of COVID-19, and we were able to feed that back to government and work alongside them around some responses.

MS CHEYNE: That is a really helpful overview. We heard evidence quite some time ago now that, with the demand over time, people were finding it hard to get through to OneLink. I know that you have genuinely very good opening hours or hours that you are available via the phone, but there was a recommendation that that be extended. Are you finding that there are people trying to contact you out of normal operational hours and is there support that can be provided in this space that would really assist with keeping up with demand or is it actually quite manageable from your perspective?

Ms Conway: I think that there will always be outliers where people experience crisis outside business hours. I think that the reality also is that somebody might be able to get through to OneLink but then what? We also need to acknowledge that not all the services are 24-hour services, not all services will accept a referral after hours. We can certainly provide information.

In terms of somebody trying to call us at 6.30 and we closed at 6, would we be able to provide any responses? Likely not, unless we were talking about somebody that we did an assessment on for the provision of brokered motel accommodation, but that is a quite a long process. It is a very fulsome assessment and looks at a number of risks

and factors. We often do that over the spread of a couple of hours. I really do not know what a small extension of operating hours would do. Kim wants to add to that.

Mrs Spinks: Yes, just building on what Clare has said, I think that a much more effective way of covering that would be for OneLink to work in conjunction with already existing 24-hour services. There are a couple of them. That is the idea that I have put forward, and that any money that would have gone to OneLink to extend hours be redirected into the things that we see the sector really needs. The bang for buck by giving OneLink more money for longer hours, I think, would be better spent by putting in specialist support services or other things that help sustain or can work alongside the homelessness sector to really help people in a holistic way.

We, as OneLink, continue to see people declined for service because they have multiple and complex needs and from a OneLink perspective that is not okay. We need to support the most vulnerable. Specialist support services is where the money should go. In terms of 24/7, OneLink can partner or liaise with a service that is already 24/7. That is our view.

Ms Conway: I just want to add that we have a mechanism for capturing support needs out of hours. It is a bit basic, in that it is simply a voicemail system, but people can leave a voicemail and our team is committed. We collect data and have a strategy around ensuring that those voicemail messages are returned the next business day. It is not a perfect system, but we recognise that, on occasions, people will try to contact us out of hours. We make sure that that contact is made with those people and that, if need be, an assessment is completed and we talk about referral and support pathways.

MS CHEYNE: Just quickly on what you were mentioning about partnering with services that are open 24 hours, how would you envisage that working and did you say that that is something that you have already suggested to government?

Mrs Spinks: It is something that I have put forward. There was a suggestion from Travis Gilbert—I have forgotten what it was—that OneLink should be 24/7 or have extended hours. That was in a document. He had asked me about that. That was my response.

In terms of actively partnering with someone, that has not happened yet but if the need was there, that would be the way I would go about it. I would strongly suggest that any extra money needs to go into support services—not to OneLink—who have 24/7 services. Let us leverage off that. Having said that, I have not talked to those services. I probably need to just preface this by saying, “Heads up.”

MS LE COUTEUR: You touched a little while ago on brokerage funding and the fact that the informal supports were less available than they had been in the past. Have you got enough funding for brokerage?

Ms Conway: That is an interesting question. How long is a piece of string? There is always need, and with increased funding there is this perception—and this is something that OneLink struggles with often—that the government has given you money, you need to put this person in a hotel, and not a lot of space is created for us to do the very full assessment that we do around that. We have definitely seen a

significant increase in brokerage expenditure throughout COVID-19. I think that there is always scope to say that we could put more people in hotels.

There are always arguments from the sector, from services and from clients themselves that OneLink should be putting more people in hotels. The challenges around that, though, are that we view brokerage very much as an investment in a long-term outcome for somebody. We are not about putting someone in a hotel for a couple of nights and then putting them back on the street. We might as well burn money, and nobody gets any value out of that.

Do we have enough money? I think that there is always space for more money for things like providing people with safe accommodation; but more money would not negate our responsibility to manage finite resources in a responsible way. I realise that that is a bit of a vague answer. Does that answer your question, though?

MS LE COUTEUR: To some extent, yes. Given the lack of other demand for hotel resources during COVID-19, have you been able to reduce your costs of hotel accommodation?

Ms Conway: Yes we have. We have made a really concerted effort to do that. I think that with the onset of COVID-19 nobody was really sure what that was going to look like and what the impacts were going to be. Absolutely, when COVID-19 first hit, we were in this space of trying to make a decision around: do we put anyone who we feel could be vulnerable to COVID-19 in a hotel and to what extent do we do our usual assessment? As we found the groove in that space—and we also had advice around the real risk of COVID-19 and how people could implement self-protective measures and other government responses—we were able to temper our expenditure around brokerage to suit. There has been a reduction in recent weeks. I would say that maybe in the last five or six weeks there has been a considerable reduction in the amount of money that we have been spending on hotel accommodation.

MS LE COUTEUR: Just one brief final question on brokerage: what is the longest that people stay in hotel accommodation via your brokerage?

Ms Conway: I am working at the moment in collaboration and close work with Street Law, which comes under the Canberra Community Law banner. We have been working with a client who I started work with in October last year. We are still currently brokering him. We have not brokered him for seven months. We have worked with him and helped him to understand the limited resources and that we need to, wherever possible, stretch that as far as we can.

Our negotiation with him has been: he was accessing some campsites and doing that sort of stuff; but when the campsites closed, he went into a hotel. When the campsites reopened—and I did not know this prior to working with this person—there are usually restrictions that you cannot go from one campsite to another and you cannot stay at a campsite for a period beyond 14 days, in most places.

We set up a schedule with that person for him to say, “I feel totally fine and happy to camp for these periods but I will need brokered accommodation for these periods.” We do that with a co-contribution model because we are conscious of two things:

firstly, we need to stretch those limited resources but also we want to give people an opportunity to feel that they have been part of their own solution and that they are not just an active recipient of “welfare”.

That person has been on and off in brokered hotels since October last year and we have spent over \$6,000 on brokerage for him alone. If necessary, I could come back to the committee with the number of brokerage nights that he has received.

We also have another family who has been in hotel accommodation since April, non-stop.

THE CHAIR: I think that would be of interest to the committee.

Ms Conway: Yes, I can do that. I think that the other thing that is really important in the context of brokerage is that we do not arbitrarily say no to anybody on any basis. We also do not arbitrarily say yes to anybody on any basis. I really want to reinforce that we are acutely aware that we are managing what, ultimately, is public money and we need to do that in a responsible, accountable and transparent way and that it needs to go towards something. Every single brokerage decision is underpinned by where this fits on a pathway to long-term accommodation solutions for an individual or a family.

MS LE COUTEUR: Can I ask one other question? The average amount of time people stay in hotel accommodation through brokerage, if you are looking at your stats, I think is possibly better than the maximum.

Ms Conway: I do not have that on hand because the numbers and the way that we support people are so flexible, depending on their needs. There is no minimum number of nights in a hotel. There is no maximum number of nights in a hotel. We are aware that there are some conversations happening in the space of OneLink only brokers for a couple of nights. I think that there is a difference between does OneLink book a hotel for a couple of nights at a time and does OneLink accommodate somebody for a couple of nights.

One of our strategies around managing that money responsibly is that we typically will book someone in a hotel for two or three nights at a time and extend every couple of days. That is because we do not want to go and book someone in a hotel for months at a time and then have a solution present itself and be in a situation where we have already spent all this money on a hotel.

One of the other things that we needed to compete with in COVID-19 was that we were working with businesses that were really profoundly impacted by COVID-19 themselves, the hotels. We do not want to set people up and say, “We’re going to move all this capital into your business but then we’re going to ask for a refund because we didn’t plan or because another opportunity arose.”

The conversation around brokerage really is very multifaceted and complex and there are so many things that we needed to consider, including acknowledgement that we are taking some of the most vulnerable people in Canberra, sometimes people with the most challenging behaviours in Canberra, and we are putting them in hotels where

people are employed as customer service staff, not as crisis intervention workers or specialist homelessness, AOD or mental health workers.

We really needed to pay attention to: are we setting anyone up to fail? Who are we setting up to fail and what are the potential impacts of an incident or a suicide or an overdose on the people who are at that hotel trying to do their job in a really hard time as well?

THE CHAIR: Ms Conway, can you please state for the record your position in OneLink?

Ms Conway: I am working as Woden Community Service's housing action team manager. I work across the OneLink complex and the supported tenancy service.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Unfortunately, that is all that we have time for in this hearing. It was great to have Mrs Spinks and Ms Conway with us. A copy of the transcript will be sent through to you both in the coming weeks. Please review that. As flagged, if you are able to send us any further relevant information, the committee would be most grateful.

Mrs Spinks: Could I have a closing comment, please? I will not take too long.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Mrs Spinks: In terms of a OneLink context, that period of time that we just had is a drop in the ocean. We have so much information that we can share that if at any time anyone wants to come directly to us, we are more than happy to talk through it.

The other thing that we really hoped to do today was compliment some great services out there who have worked extremely collaboratively with OneLink and we so appreciate the great work that they are doing. There are some really amazing services within the homelessness sector and we value their support and collaboration.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for that encouraging final note. It is a very pleasant note to finish on and the committee certainly shares your appreciation for all those other providers but also the work that Woden Valley Community Service and the team at OneLink are doing as well. Thank you. That concludes today's hearing.

Mrs Spinks: Thank you.

Ms Conway: Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 12.39 pm.