



**QUESTION TIME**  
OF THE  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**HANSARD**

Edited proof transcript

Thursday, 11 February 2021

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**Thursday, 11 February 2021**

Questions without notice:

Canberra Hospital—emergency patient discharge .....	1
Transport Canberra—Whitlam bus services.....	2
Hospitals—waiting times .....	4
Budget—business support .....	5
Sport—facilities.....	7
Health workers—occupational violence.....	8
Light rail—stage 2A .....	10
Housing ACT—vacant property.....	11
Budget—emergency services .....	12
Homelessness—services.....	13
Animals—cat containment .....	14
Housing—funding .....	15
Government—assistance for veterans and seniors .....	18
Business—support.....	18
Waste—bulky waste collection .....	19

## **Questions without notice**

### **Canberra Hospital—emergency patient discharge**

**MS LEE:** My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, on the night of February 2021, when asked about what you would do differently to ensure that you meet your October deadline of 70 per cent of patients seen on time in ACT emergency departments, you said that you would take a “whole-of-hospital approach”. In 2020 the CEO of CHS talked about implementing a whole-of-hospital approach. Ms Fitzharris, in June and November 2018, also said that she would take a whole-of-hospital approach. Ms Gallagher, in June, July and October 2013, also said that she would take a whole-of-hospital approach. Minister, given that a whole-of-hospital approach has been what your government has been doing for the last eight years or more, what will you do differently to meet your deadline of October 2021?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank the Leader of the Opposition for her question and remind her again that the data that we are looking at in terms of meeting that timeliness relates to the number of people who are admitted and discharged, present and are discharged from the emergency department, or admitted to the hospital within four hours, to reach that 70 per cent benchmark. That is what I was talking to the journalist about in relation to that comment, and that is the figure that we focused on.

What the Leader of the Opposition’s question highlights is that it is really important to take a whole-of-hospital approach. It also highlights that it is really challenging to do that. The CEO of Canberra Health Services has spoken a number of times about how that is happening. She has spoken in particular about the timely care strategy, which is focused on a series of redesign and improvement initiatives to ensure that patients receive the right care at the right time in the right place.

CHS has really taken a methodological approach and developed targeted redesign and improvement initiatives. One of those, as I spoke about the other day, has been the full care discharge lounge, where people are able to be discharged from a ward to a lounge where they are still able to receive ongoing care. They do not need to be ambulatory and self-supporting to be in the discharge lounge if they are being discharged, for example, to residential aged-care facilities, a hospital in the home environment or a home environment where they are receiving carer support. That is something different. That has not been done in Canberra Hospital before. The Leader of the Opposition asked me what we are doing differently. That is different. The full care discharge lounge is up and running and has recently been expanded. It has been very successful.

**MS LEE:** Minister, what did Ms Gallagher and Ms Fitzharris get wrong with their whole-of-hospital approach that you will get right in your whole-of-hospital approach?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I have never suggested that previous ministers got anything wrong.

**MRS JONES:** Minister, will you stop using your buzzwords and give us a detailed

plan of what will be done to meet your goal by the end of October 2021?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I refer Mrs Jones to my previous answer, where I detailed one initiative that is being done. Another one is whole ward huddles to identify patients who can be discharged in a timely way. And there is what is called a red to green strategy—I spoke about this the other day in the Assembly—about identifying the blockages to patient discharge, making sure that those are addressed, and ensuring that people take responsibility for the timely discharge of their patients.

I have also spoken about the emergency department redesign projects and the interaction between the emergency department and the rest of the hospital, in particular the new admission procedure from the emergency department to the wards, the direct admission procedure. That is something that is different. In fact, the director of the emergency department said that that is something that would not have been able to be done in Canberra Hospital in previous years.

It really speaks to the change in the culture of the hospital that the current CEO, Bernadette McDonald, and her leadership team are delivering, making sure that everybody understands that it is a whole-of-hospital responsibility to improve the timeliness of care and to improve the experience of patient care right across the hospital. Being discharged in a timely way is not only important in terms of addressing bed block; it is also important in terms of patient experience. We do not want patients to be in the hospital longer than they need to be. It is not good for them to have that experience.

Another element of the emergency department redesign project is a review of triage processes and workforce models that support patient flow within the emergency department. I spoke the other day about needing to ensure that people who are not going to be admitted to the hospital are seen and discharged from the emergency department in a timely way. We are speaking in detail about the things that we are doing.

### **Transport Canberra—Whitlam bus services**

**MS CLAY:** My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services and relates to bus services in new suburbs. Given that we know there was good uptake from day one for bus services for Coombs and Wright, and given that we know that transport habits are formed when people first purchase and then move into a new property, can you guarantee that the residents of the new suburb of Whitlam will have regular bus services from the moment that they move into their new homes?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Ms Clay for her question. I agree that it is important to have bus services as soon as possible, as people move into new suburbs, so that they can form those habits of using public transport rather than relying on private vehicles, particularly to commute through to the city. Extensive planning has been underway for well over a decade for Molonglo, including transport planning for the suburb. That included extensive work that was undertaken with expert advice from transport planner Jarrett Walker, who has written a whole case study in his book *Human Transit* about Molonglo transport planning. This book was used at the time to inform the estate development plans that have been associated with the rollout of Molonglo and

will continue to inform our work around transport planning for future stages of Molonglo, including Molonglo 3.

We know that the Molonglo River bridge will be a key enabling project for transport in the Molonglo region. We would like to see the Rapid 10 service—which has been incredibly popular and which will also have stops directly outside Whitlam on John Gorton Drive—provided to that suburb in the future. But, of course, that will rely on the bridge being built. In the future, the ACT government will look at whether we can extend that north, potentially to Belconnen.

We also want to make sure that those people have a good trip to the city, so rapid transit is going to be important for the future of Molonglo suburbs. We know how incredibly popular those services have been since we introduced them in 2019, and we have since increased the frequency. We also know that the connecting feeder route bus services are going to play an incredibly important role. The exact timing of that will be determined once we go through the network update. (*Time expired.*)

**MS CLAY:** Minister, I am really pleased to hear about all that detailed planning work and those future plans, but what I really want to know is whether the residents will have a bus service from the first day they move in, because once they have bought a car they have made a decision for the next 15 or 20 years, and they may not come back.

**MR STEEL:** I thank Ms Clay for her question. We hope to provide those services as soon as possible. We expect that Whitlam will have a local route bus through the suburb, which will be using Sculthorpe Avenue. The road has been designed to accommodate buses to ensure that there is enough room. Of course, there are currently bus stops on John Gorton Drive, adjacent to the suburb, ready for a future bus route, potentially that rapid service, once it comes north. Transport Canberra will also continue to work on the future planning around the bus system, including future bus depots. We are looking at a future bus depot in the north—potentially in west Belconnen or the Gungahlin region to enable us to grow the fleet and meet the growing number of people and suburbs that will be coming on line, including Whitlam, over the coming years.

**MR DAVIS:** Minister, can you confirm that, going forward, all new suburbs and subdivisions will be serviced by buses from day one?

**MR STEEL:** As I mentioned, we are continuing to work on the transport planning for the new suburb of Whitlam. We have also been working on other suburbs. One great example is Ginninderry, where we have worked with the Ginninderry developer to establish a bus service very early in the life of that suburb. That has seen local small buses, which are known as Hino Ponchos, via a service feeder through to—

**Mr Parton:** I have a point of order with respect to relevance. The question was very specific in terms of whether the government could guarantee bus services from day one.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I think the minister covered that fairly early in his question, Mr Parton. There is no point of order.

**MR STEEL:** We are providing services from Ginninderry into Kippax and also to the local schools. We know how important those services are so that people can form good early habits in using public transport, and we will continue to ensure that we extend bus services through to those suburbs as soon as we can.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** If your colleagues remain quiet, Mrs Jones, you may be able to ask your question.

### **Hospitals—waiting times**

**MRS JONES:** My question is to the Minister for Health. On Friday, 22 January 2021, the ABC reported that a Canberra man grew sick of waiting for elective surgery at Canberra Hospital and took matters into his own hands, using a utility knife to remove a painful grape-sized cyst that was affecting his work. This was after waiting more than two years after being referred for elective surgery by his GP. Minister, how do you respond to this distressing case?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Mrs Jones for the question. The first response is, as the president or past president—I am not sure—of the ACT AMA, Antonio Di Dio, indicated, “Please do not try this at home.” It is not a safe practice to perform surgery on yourself. If your condition is causing more disruption to your work or your life, please return to your GP and get re-referred if your condition is worsening. That is the advice that we provide to anybody who is on the waiting list. Without the specific details in relation to what this individual was waiting for, it is hard to provide a response, and obviously I would not be commenting on individual matters anyway.

More broadly, it does point to the fact that this appeared to be, potentially, a relatively straightforward procedure that could have been done outside the hospital system. One of the things that we are working with the Capital Health Network on is improving referrals between GPs, from one GP to another, where they have the capacity to do a different type of work, whether that is in a particular area of specialisation or whether that is in terms of performing more surgical procedures than their own GP possibly could do.

Another thing we have committed to through the election campaign is establishing a north-side elective surgery centre so that things that can be done in day surgery, where you do not need to be admitted to hospital overnight, can be done in a clearer and more timely fashion that will not be disrupted by the advent of an emergency surgery that might push back an elective procedure. So there are a range of things that we have underway to address some of those issues.

**MRS JONES:** Minister, is more than two years an acceptable wait for this kind of surgery, and can you understand why this man took matters into his own hands?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I do understand that it can be extremely frustrating for people who are waiting for elective surgery. But the ACT system, like all health systems across the country, has a triage process when it comes to elective surgery

prioritisation and, indeed, outpatients prioritisation. One of the questions here is whether this individual was in fact waiting for elective surgery or whether he was waiting for an outpatients appointment. That, in the story, is not very clear. There is a lack of clarity in relation to this individual matter. But I certainly understand that it is extremely frustrating for people when they are waiting, whether it is for outpatients or for elective surgery. We do not want to see that. But it is the reality of a public health system that there will always be some people who are waiting. That is the case not only here in the ACT but also across the country and around the world.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, will your nine-month deadline to fix hospital wait times include fixing elective surgery waiting times?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Mr Hanson for the question. We have actually had great success in growing our elective surgery numbers over the last few years. Over the last five years, pre-COVID-19 the ACT had been growing elective surgery numbers at twice the national average rate. We have seen our seen-on-time numbers improving, particularly for category 2 elective surgeries, over that period. Over the decade they improved from about 44 per cent of category 2 patients seen on time to more than 70 per cent of category 2 patients seen on time. Through the response to the COVID-19 situation, where we saw non-urgent category 2 and 3 elective surgeries reduced as a response—

**Mr Hanson:** I raise a point of order on relevance, Madam Speaker. The minister is giving us a bit of a history lesson, but the question was whether the elective surgery wait times are included in her promise to fix wait times at the hospital. I ask her to be succinct and directly relevant, please.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** She is on the policy area and she has a minute left.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** In response to those delayed elective surgeries, we are on track to deliver more than 16,000 elective surgeries this financial year. We were, pre-COVID, on track to deliver 14,250 elective surgeries, and in the previous year we delivered more than 14,000, which was more than ever before. During the election campaign, we committed to continuing to increase our rate of elective surgery. That will continue to address both waiting times and the number of people on the waiting list. We will continue to improve, as we have been over time. We will not make ridiculous promises that could never be delivered, which is what we saw the Canberra Liberals do during the election campaign.

### **Budget—business support**

**MR PETTERSSON:** My question is to the Minister for Business and Better Regulation. Minister, can you please outline to the Assembly how the budget supports clubs?

**MS CHEYNE:** I thank Mr Pettersson for the question. We recognise that our clubs, like many businesses, had an exceptional 2020, impacted by a dry summer, bushfires and then, of course, the pandemic. We are committed to supporting our clubs, and one of the ways we are doing this is in regard to water. Water costs make up a significant proportion of clubs' costs, and they are fixed costs that cannot be lowered just because

patronage might be down.

With this budget the government will be immediately establishing a hardship fund for clubs who are high intensity users of non-potable water. We will provide a full rebate of those clubs' non-potable water costs for the 2020-21 financial year. This is an immediate, tangible outcome that will help clubs as they come through the recovery and continue to provide the services and spaces that so many Canberrans enjoy.

To support clubs with cost pressures in the long term, we are conducting a review of non-potable water costs for high-intensity users. The government will work with clubs in understanding their costs, together with an ICRC investigation, with a view to learning how these costs can be more sustainable.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Minister, how does the budget provide support to local businesses more generally?

**MS CHEYNE:** This question goes to the heart of the government's agenda and the heart of the budget. We are focused on helping Canberrans drive the recovery from the pandemic. Local businesses and clubs throughout Canberra are at the forefront of that effort. In December the government trialled the ChooseCBR digital discount scheme. Canberrans redeemed \$310,000 worth of discounts on transactions, and those transactions totalled over \$1.9 million. This has a multiplier effect of 6.3.

This budget allows for the full rollout of the scheme this year, meaning \$2 million is available in digital discounts. This will further encourage discretionary consumer spending, increase consumer and business confidence and ensure that spending goes straight to the Canberra businesses who did it tough in 2020.

The budget also supports local businesses in the hospitality sector, which was hit particularly hard by COVID-19. The government will continue to waive or reduce a number of fees, saving cafes and restaurants an estimated \$2.25 million. The food business registration fee will be waived for a further 12 months, through to the end of March 2022, benefiting over 3,000 businesses. The outdoor dining permit fee will continue to be waived for a further year, through to the end of June 2022, benefiting 270 businesses. Liquor licensing fees for "on" liquor and for general liquor licensed venues will be reduced by 50 per cent for a year, through to 1 April 2022, benefiting over 570 businesses.

**DR PATERSON:** Minister, how does the budget provide longer term support to businesses working through the recovery?

**MS CHEYNE:** I thank Dr Paterson for her question and her interest in business recovery. The recovery period provides an opportunity to pursue reforms that will ensure that Canberra's economic growth continues. This budget creates the better regulation task force. The task force's purpose is to review the business environment in the ACT and pursue reforms that will make doing business in the ACT easier. Our economy is changing, driven by some of the most innovative businesses in the country, and the government is committed to assisting them, together with our more traditional businesses, to do what they do best within a regulatory environment that just makes things easier.

**Sport—facilities**

**MR DAVIS:** My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation and relates to the Mpowerdome. Minister, on reflection, I fear my question to you on Tuesday lacked clarity, so I thought I would ask a more specific question to ensure a more specific answer. Will the government commit to at least exploring the option of acquiring the Mpowerdome?

**MS BERRY:** No, not at this stage. The Mpowerdome story is a long one and started before I was Minister for Sport and Recreation. Mr Rattenbury will recall some of the difficulties with dealing with Mpowerdome and trying to ensure that that for-profit commercial organisation could stay operational and offer multi-sports to the Tuggeranong community but more broadly the Canberra community as well.

I know how disappointed the Canberra community is about the Mpowerdome, and we have had many discussions in this place about it. Mr Wall was very passionate in his concern for Mpowerdome in the community, as, of course, are you, Madam Speaker. I do not think a week went by where I was not contacted by you about Mpowerdome.

Unfortunately, Mpowerdome, being a commercial business, decided to close its doors in 2016. As far as I know, it still remains for sale and on the market. As far as I could see today when I checked, the asking price is \$4 million-plus on Allhomes. I understand that a number of organisations are interested in either purchasing or leasing Mpowerdome. At the moment I also understand that a community Aboriginal organisation, Yeddung Mura, have leased some of the facilities at Mpowerdome and are operating out of there.

Of course, the Kambah multi-sport facility has opened its doors again and it offers a whole range of different sports for the Tuggeranong community to engage in, similar to the ones Mpowerdome offered—soccer, netball, volleyball and cricket, as well as inflatable world. I understand the concerns around Mpowerdome. It has had a long story and engagement from a number of ministers in this place. (*Time expired.*)

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you, Minister. What is your alternative proposal for the placement of a multi-sport facility in South Tuggeranong?

**MS BERRY:** I refer Mr Davis to my previous answer. The Kambah private commercial organisation which has reopened its doors is offering multi-sports facilities to communities in Tuggeranong.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Minister, what advice would you give to community sports organisations, many of whom are currently at the mercy of private providers for the provision of appropriate sporting facilities?

**MS BERRY:** I thank Mr Braddock for his supplementary question. The government provides sports facilities all across the ACT for community sports organisations. I ran through a few yesterday in Tuggeranong where upgrades have happened, and they have been done across the ACT, including sports facilities in Belconnen, with the restoration of Higgins neighbourhood oval, lighting upgrades at Hawker,

improvements to Hawker oval, improved drainage at Kippax enclosed field, and improvements at GIO Stadium, including family-friendly change rooms. I have referred a number of times to the upgrades that we are doing with regard to female-friendly change rooms to ensure that they remain inclusive for everybody who wants to play sports.

At Gungahlin we have continued work on the design of the Throsby home of football, completed stage 1 of Taylor district playing fields, installed synthetic grass at Nicholls, developed Moncrieff Community Park, upgraded irrigation at Gungahlin enclosed oval, and upgraded lighting at Nicholls.

In central Canberra upgrades have been made to: the Canberra District Rugby League Centre of Excellence at Braddon for the Canberra Raiders and Region Football; Boomanulla Oval; and grandstands and amenities at Narrabundah Park, to name a few.

In Woden, Weston Creek and Molonglo we have completed the Stromlo Leisure Centre. If anybody has not visited yet, I really encourage you to get up there. It is an amazing facility, funded by the ACT government and operated by the YMCA. We have also upgraded the pavilion at Waramanga district playing fields, redeveloped Phillip oval, and undergone planning and design for Stromlo district playing fields. They are just a few of the things that the ACT government has done in upgrading and providing sports facilities for community clubs all across the ACT.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Before giving the next call, I remind members of standing order 117 and the rules for all questions. I understand your interest, Mr Davis, in Mpowerdome, but I hope you were not seeking to ask the minister to announce executive or government policy. I remind members about the standing order rules of engagement.

### **Health workers—occupational violence**

**MR HANSON:** My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, on 7 February this year, a constituent who is also an emergency doctor said that he is attacked by ice addicts and other illicit drug users almost every day at work. What is the government doing to protect emergency and frontline workers from being attacked while doing their job?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** As members would be aware, Canberra Health Services released its occupational violence strategy last year. Calvary hospital also is very focused on this. It is becoming a more and more significant issue.

One of the things that we have been doing is ensuring that people feel empowered to report occupational violence. The type of violence that Mr Hanson refers to is very serious. One of the elements of the strategy and one of the elements of the work that we are doing is to introduce a code grey that will call in additional support in relation to a situation that can be de-escalated. We have a whole range of other supports that do not go specifically to the type of situation that Mr Hanson is talking about, but the Occupational Violence Prevention and Management Committee has a broad representation of ACT Policing, the ACT Ambulance Service, Corrections ACT,

WorkSafe ACT, Carers ACT, healthcare consumers and the Mental Health Consumer Network, as well as managers and staff from Canberra Health Services, who are working through these issues.

It is a very difficult situation when you have drug-affected people in the emergency department. It is something that I recently discussed with wardspeople in a meeting about their experience. Canberra Health Services and Calvary hospital will continue to work with staff on what strategies they can use to ensure that these incidents are minimised and appropriately addressed—preferably that they do not occur at all.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, what specific support services are available to emergency and frontline workers who suffer physical or mental injury, including PTSD, as a result of being attacked on the job?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** There are a range of support services that are available to staff right across the ACT public service, specifically in our healthcare services. Those include the standard employee support services, but also respect and development officers—independent people you can go to to report specific instances not just of occupational violence from patients or family members but also in relation to other matters that might occur in the workplace.

People also have access to work health and safety and WorkCover arrangements. Workers compensation arrangements are fairly standard in being able to address some of those issues. If someone has a psychosocial injury or a psychological injury as a result of an injury in their workplace, there are a whole range of other measures that come into play in relation to both supporting those people to recover and return to work and providing financial support through workers compensation if that is what is required.

**MRS JONES:** Minister, given the occupational violence strategy you discussed, why is this issue, as you just said, becoming a more and more significant issue—in your own words?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Thank you for the supplementary question. There are some behavioural factors where we seem to be seeing an increase in occupational violence, but I think it is also that people are noticing it more and not accepting it as part of the job in the way that doctors and nurses and their support staff have previously done, in the same way that other professions have accepted that this is just part of the job.

Part of the awareness raising about occupational violence, both by unions and by management, has been to make sure that staff understand that this is not acceptable and it should be reported so that something can be done about it, so that appropriate responses can be made, both at the time and subsequently, to support staff.

We are seeing much greater awareness of the issue of occupational violence. That is contributing to the increased reporting that we see. People are being encouraged to report. They are being encouraged to report not just the most serious physical instances of occupational violence but also things that they may not previously have considered to be occupational violence but which do pose a threat to their physical safety or their psychological safety.

It is about a whole-of-service response to ensure that people feel safe and that people work together to understand how to de-escalate when there is a risk of violence occurring and how to respond to it.

### **Light rail—stage 2A**

**MR PARTON:** My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. Minister, in recent weeks it has been revealed that light rail stage 2A has cleared a major hurdle, with federal environmental approvals being signed off. Now that stage 2A is a step closer to becoming reality, can you explain to us exactly how motorists, commuters and pedestrians will be impacted by construction along the proposed route from Alinga Street, around London Circuit, to Commonwealth Avenue Bridge?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Mr Parton for his question. We have been very clear from the very beginning that we know there will be some short-term disruption while this major transport infrastructure project is built. That also includes the raising of London Circuit, providing an upgraded intersection between London Circuit and Commonwealth Avenue. We will seek to minimise that as much as possible. We will be working as closely as we can with the National Capital Authority in relation to their major infrastructure project around the strengthening of the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, so that work can potentially take place at a similar time to parts of the construction of light rail stage 2A.

The ACT government has required the owner of the section 63 block to build an extension to Edinburgh Avenue, which has recently been completed, and which connects from London Circuit through to Vernon Circle. It provides another way for people to get through to the western side of the CBD.

We will be clearly communicating with Canberra residents as well as businesses in the stage 2A project footprint about potential disruptions during the construction period. Those communications will be made available closer to the start of construction, once we have got through the important approvals processes that still need to be obtained from the NCA and the ACT planning and land authority, and once procurement has been finalised for the project.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, will businesses hindered by light rail 2A's construction be offered compensation for lost sales caused by the development?

**MR STEEL:** No, we do not expect that to be the case, similar to stage 1. What we have learned from stage 1 is that we need to communicate early with businesses that may be affected along this route. The 1.7-kilometre extension to the line goes through the courts precinct. We have already begun communication with those who are affected in the courts precinct, as well as businesses along London Circuit, the Australian National University, and hotels, including QT, along the route.

Those are the majority of businesses along the corridor. Once the light rail extends down onto the median strip of Commonwealth Avenue and then further on, we will be consulting further with businesses that may be affected, and other organisations like the parliament, around State Circle. Thankfully, with stage 2B, once it goes on to

Adelaide Avenue, there are very few people that are affected along the median strip there. We are looking forward and hope to have reduced disruptions as a result along the Adelaide Avenue part of the extension of 2B in the future.

**MR CAIN:** Minister, what impact will the construction have on traffic flow around the entirety of Vernon Circle, including the linking lanes on the northern and southern ends, and what flow-on effects will there be?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Mr Cain for his question. This will be disruptive for traffic and it may mean that people will have to think about a different way of getting in to the city than they have been used to, rather than using Commonwealth Avenue, particularly during the construction period. We are also working closely with Transport Canberra and through MPC to look at the impacts on the transport system.

There are a range of ways to get through to the city. Of course, this was planned for many decades ago, with the construction of major new roads, including the Gungahlin Drive extension, that provides an arterial road on the western side of the city, and on the eastern side with the extension to the Monaro Highway through the Majura Parkway. These roads do provide new ways of getting in to the city, new major thoroughfares through the city, that can be used by people, rather than needing to use the ceremonial gateway into the city on Commonwealth Avenue. That will have to be, potentially, closed for a period of time while works are undertaken to raise London Circuit up to that grade level.

We will be clearly communicating what those disruptions will be so that Canberrans can make their choices about how they can best make their way into the city, if they are commuting to the city, or indeed avoid the city and not take a route through the city, if they are going elsewhere.

### **Housing ACT—vacant property**

**MR COE:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. I refer to the 30 properties at the mixed-use Toolangi complex in Kaleen, which sat unoccupied for 15 months while the government sought a higher revenue deal from CatholicCare. Documents released in an FOI request also state that Housing ACT was using a “fairly targeted” and “selective” approach when determining who would be offered those properties. Minister, why was the government willing to let these units sit vacant for 450 days while over 2,400 people were on the waiting list for a public housing property at the same time?

**MS BERRY:** Yes, it was an unacceptable time for those places to be empty when there are people in need of housing in the ACT. I have already expressed my frustration at the length of time it took. However, I am convinced that Housing ACT and the community housing provider, CatholicCare, have worked together on a really good arrangement that provides support for different people in our community who need different kinds of wraparound supports, including people who have mental health conditions or other disabilities.

Some of those units were changed to make sure that they were even more inclusive and had automatic door opening so that people who were living with a disability were

able to get more access to that accommodation, with more accessibility. CatholicCare and Housing ACT were working on the best possible model for that complex. It is a different model for the ACT and it was a complex negotiation because it is a 20-year contract with CatholicCare. I am comfortable now with the work that Housing ACT and CatholicCare have done to get this arrangement. But I do share the opposition members' frustration at the length of time that it took to get to this place.

**MR COE:** Minister, did you raise any concerns along the way—that is, perhaps at the three-month or the six-month mark, did you raise concerns as to why these properties were vacant? If so, why did it still take many months to actually get tenants into those properties?

**MS BERRY:** Yes, I did raise concerns along the way. I have already explained in my first answer that this was a complex negotiation for a 20-year contract, something different for the ACT. I am now confident that that arrangement is a good one and will serve those residents well into the future.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, which types of tenants were being targeted when these properties were being offered? More specifically, were these properties offered on the basis of greatest need, or were other factors at play when these properties were allocated?

**MS BERRY:** I am not sure what you are implying with “other factors in play”. But these are community properties, not public housing properties, so, yes, they were targeted for people who are living with different kinds of disabilities, including mental health conditions.

### **Budget—emergency services**

**DR PATERSON:** My question is to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. How is the government driving innovation in the ACT Ambulance Service and ACT Policing?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Dr Paterson for her question and for her interest in the safety of Canberrans. I have been proud to have worked with staff across ACT Policing and the ACT Ambulance Service to implement the new innovative Police, Ambulance and Clinician Early Response Service. PACER is an integrated service model that brings together police, paramedics and mental health clinicians to support the safe assessment and treatment of people experiencing acute mental health episodes. The PACER model has been proven to reduce demand on our crucial policing, paramedics and emergency departments and secure better outcomes for people in need.

We have invested an additional \$14.1 million for PACER in this budget, a top-up of the \$720,000 provided as part of the mental health support program last year so that our 29 highly trained PACER members can continue to achieve positive results for the Canberra community. This is just one of the many innovations we are delivering as part of our ongoing commitment to supporting our first responders to keep Canberrans safe and to achieve better outcomes for those in need.

**DR PATERSON:** Thank you, Minister. What benefits will PACER bring to the ACT community?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I am pleased to report that PACER has already resulted in better mental health outcomes for people in need, while reducing demand in our emergency responders. PACER has resulted in a significant downturn in the number of mental health patients apprehended under the Mental Health Act and presenting to the emergency departments. During 2020 PACER teams responded to 1,249 mental health callouts that resulted in 963 Canberrans receiving care in the home and remaining in the community.

I am pleased that patients responded to by PACER have been able to receive alternative appropriate care in the community, rather than being taken to hospital. Diverting someone experiencing a mental health crisis away from the emergency departments and police custody means they can start recovering sooner from a better starting point. This delivers on our commitment to provide better outcomes for Canberrans experiencing mental health challenges by reducing avoidable hospital presentations and contact with the justice system while also reducing demand on our hardworking emergency responders.

**MS ORR:** Minister, how is the government supporting staff across emergency services?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I think Ms Orr for her interest in our staff as well. The government is committed to supporting staff across our emergency services so that they can keep our community safe. We have been working hard to ensure that our emergency service responders are able to deliver well-resourced, community-focused services that enhance public safety and respond to the changing needs of our growing city. We have made and will continue to make significant staffing investments, provide new vehicles and equipment, fund new and upgraded facilities and ensure that our staff receive the training and opportunities they need to best serve our community.

We will also continue to invest in innovative and creative solutions such as PACER that help to reduce demand on the emergency responders and enable them to achieve better outcomes. These investments have enabled our first responders to consistently achieve the fastest response times in the country, ensuring that Canberrans receive swift help in emergencies. Thank you to our hardworking staff across our emergency services for their ongoing commitment and dedication to our community.

### **Homelessness—services**

**MRS KIKKERT:** My question is to the Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services. Minister, it has been reported that over the past year the territory had the second highest rate of repeat homelessness in Australia. In 2017 there were 34 people on the priority waiting list and now there are 191, including those in the tent city behind CMAG, which many of us walk past every day. Minister, why are more Canberrans failing to receive the homelessness services they desperately need?

**MS VASSAROTTI:** I thank Mrs Kikkert for the question. As reported in the *RoGS* report, which was referred to by Mrs Kikkert, we saw an increase in homelessness in

the ACT last year, which was really disappointing. We have seen an increase in funding of homelessness services over the last three years, as well. We have seen an increase in the number of people accessing our homelessness services, but there has been an increase in the complexity of their needs as well. We have seen an increase in the numbers of people, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March. We are looking at how we respond to these issues. We have seen a number of new services introduced through the COVID-19 period. We have announced additional funding for these services through the budget that has just been announced.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Why, Minister, with an increase in funding, is your Labor-Greens government still leaving people out on the streets in places like Dickson, Civic, Cooleman Court and Phillip?

**MS VASSAROTTI:** The responses to homelessness are really complex, and there are a range of services in the specialist homelessness services sector which are working really hard to address these issues. One of the key things that we have in the ACT is a central intake service model that is trying to integrate services and provide a single place where people can come in and get their needs responded to by the services they need.

We have a number of other services, particularly the St Vincent's Street to Home program, which is trying to respond to the issue of rough sleeping and is working with people on a very regular basis and trying to meet them where they are. In some instances, people are not ready to access services. In those instances, ongoing services are provided through programs such as Street to Home and the night patrol service. Certainly, the new Axial Housing service is specifically working with rough sleepers who have complex needs, to provide them with permanent housing. This is not an issue that is easy to solve, but it is one that the government is absolutely focused on. We are providing additional funding to ensure that we are able to meet people and provide everyone with a decent home.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, can you guarantee, as per your party's pre-election rhetoric, that no Canberran will be homeless by the end of this year?

**MS VASSAROTTI:** Thank you, Mr Parton, for the question. Certainly, we did not guarantee that no person would be homeless by the end of the year. We have spoken a lot about providing everyone with a decent home, and I am absolutely committed to working with the specialist homelessness sector to reduce homelessness and eliminate homelessness if we possibly can. These are complex issues. They are issues that we all need to work on, and we will be providing support to specialist homelessness services, as well as other housing services and the whole community to do everything we can to reduce and eliminate homelessness.

### **Animals—cat containment**

**MR BRADDOCK:** My question is to the Minister for the Environment. Yerrabi has many cat containment suburbs, but there are some suburbs that are not. The parliamentary and governing agreement includes mention of increasing cat containment measures. Minister, can you please explain what this might look like?

**MS VASSAROTTI:** I thank Mr Braddock for the question. The issue of cat containment has had a bit of focus over the last little while. It has been looked at by ACT government for some time, and cat containment is something that we will be working on as a government over the coming months.

While cats are much-loved family members—about a quarter of households in the ACT have cats—we also know they have quite significant impacts in the community. As Mr Braddock noted, there are a number of cat containment suburbs—in fact, 17 areas have been declared catchment areas under the Domestic Animals Act—and all new suburbs will be cat containment suburbs, moving forward.

In a draft cat plan released in 2019 we sought people’s views about cat containment. While there was an understanding that one of the objectives is around expanding cat containment, there was not consensus regarding exactly how additional cat containment could be moved forward. This is an issue we will be looking at in coming months. I look forward to working with Minister Steel, in particular, in terms of how we increase cat containment across the suburbs in a way that considers animal welfare as well as the impact on the community.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Will the government be moving towards a territory-wide cat containment system?

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Earlier during question time I referred to standing order 117(c). Members need to be very mindful about seeking any announcements out of the executive.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Fair enough, Madam Speaker. I will change to the question to: what information assistance will be made available to cat owners during that process?

**Mr Hanson:** Do you get to change a question because you don’t like it?

**MADAM SPEAKER:** You can stand on your feet and raise a point of order or you can just be quiet, Mr Hanson.

**Mr Hanson:** Well, Madam Speaker, you make the rulings, and you did not seem to rule. Are you ruling it out of order or not? I am confused.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I have given him grace to change his question. Ms Vassarotti, you have the floor.

**MS VASSAROTTI:** Thank you, Mr Braddock for the question. As noted, we will be looking at cat containment and whether we will be increasing cat containment further in the next period. If we make any changes to the way that we manage cats, absolutely, education and support to the community will be part of that process.

### **Housing—funding**

**MR CAIN:** My question is to the Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services. Minister, in January you announced that the Labor-Greens coalition government will dedicate \$2.6 million for ACT homelessness services. At the time you, said that

secure housing is fundamental for the wellbeing of our community as a whole. Figures from the ACT Council of Social Service indicate that 9,500 low income households in Canberra experienced rental stress in the past year. Data from Homelessness Australia and Everybody's Home show that Canberra needs another 3,000 social housing properties to keep up with demand. Minister, what is the Labor-Greens coalition government doing to fix this shortfall in social housing for Canberrans?

**MS BERRY:** Madam Speaker, I should probably answer that question. I am responsible for implementing the housing strategy, as well as the growth and renewal program that the ACT government has embarked on. It is more appropriate for me to answer the question.

There has been significant work in the ACT on our growth and renewal program for the next years. Over the 10 years to 2025, the ACT government will have spent over \$1 billion on our growth and renewal program, increasing the amount of public housing but also making sure that housing is appropriate and meets the needs of each tenant, and that it is sustainable, accessible and affordable in the sense of heating and cooling in Canberra's changing climate.

The growth and renewal program for the next four years has over 1,000 homes being renewed across the ACT. Once that is completed, over 20 per cent of the ACT's public housing stock will have been renewed as part of this program. As well, in accordance with the parliamentary and governing agreement, there will be an increase in the number of public housing properties, to 400.

In addition to that, OneLink provides services to put people in touch with different service organisations to get them into homes of their own. It might not be public housing; it might not be community housing. It might be private rental or it might be opportunities to get into different housing and accommodation. Housing ACT does all this work, along with its partners in OneLink, to provide services to people in our community who need them. Public housing might not always be the appropriate option for them.

**MR CAIN:** What is the coalition government doing to alleviate the rental stress of those 9,500 low income rental households?

**MS BERRY:** There has been significant work done by the ACT government. I refer Peter Cain to answers to questions this week by Mr Parton.

*Mr Hanson interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Don't respond to interjections, Ms Berry.

**MS BERRY:** Yes, Madam Speaker. We are making sure that people can have rental support in the ACT but also making sure that there are properties available. We talked yesterday about the supply of land in the ACT, and there is land available for purchase. Affordable community and public housing are committed to be 15 per cent across all of the ACT, brownfields and greenfields, to ensure that all housing meets everybody's needs, regardless of where they are, their incomes or their backgrounds,

so that they are supported into accommodation that meets their needs.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, when will the government acknowledge its pure neglect of the thousands of Canberrans who are suffering housing stress?

**MS BERRY:** This is not an issue that the ACT government faces on its own. Mr Parton will know that this week I referred to the National Rental Affordability Scheme, which finishes up soon, which really did assist people to get into their homes. That is in the federal government's program areas and is a way that they can provide funding to support community housing and public housing to make sure that accommodation is available for people.

In addition to that, the decrease in the JobSeeker funding—whatever it is called, whatever the welfare arrangement is—is affecting people's ability to afford to get into homes of their own, whether that is public housing or not. In addition to that, former governments' decisions to cut penalty rates for low income earners in the ACT have definitely affected their ability to have a home of their own and to be able to live a decent life. It is not just an ACT problem.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MS BERRY:** It has got worse.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, allow the minister to answer.

*Mr Coe interjecting—*

**MS BERRY:** I had not finished.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I was calling people to order. Ms Berry, you have the floor and you have 40 seconds left.

**Mr Hanson:** Madam Speaker, on calling people to order, I note that it was Mr Barr who was debating Mr Parton, and Mr Barr debated Mrs Jones and Mr Coe.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Sit down, Mr Hanson.

**Mr Hanson:** You only call opposition members to order. I ask that you be even-handed in these matters.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, please allow the minister to conclude in the time she has left, if she wishes to.

*Mr Hanson interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** No more, Mr Hanson. Are you finishing, Ms Berry?

**MS BERRY:** Yes, thank you, Madam Speaker. As I said, the ACT government is

doing its bit—absolutely its bit, way more than the rest of the country—in its per capita contribution to public housing in the ACT: \$1 billion over 10 years to increase and provide different kinds of public housing in the ACT. We cannot do it on our own. If the same investment or partnerships were made across the country, including by the federal government, we could do so much more. This is not an ACT situation alone.

### **Government—assistance for veterans and seniors**

**MS LAWDER:** My question is to the Chief Minister. On 3 December 2020 you were asked if you would commit to re-establishing a dedicated minister for seniors and veterans. You said that “if it was of such importance” you would update the administrative orders accordingly. In the public hearings schedule for the upcoming annual reports and estimates hearings, there is still no minister or output class recorded for veterans and seniors. Chief Minister, is your failure to update the administrative orders an admission that you do not consider this to be a matter of “such importance”?

**MR BARR:** I believe the administrative orders were, in fact, updated on 1 February.

**MS LAWDER:** Chief Minister, what has your government actually done for veterans and seniors organisations since disbanding the ministry for the Tenth Assembly?

**MR BARR:** That would be less than a hundred days ago, so I will take the detail on notice but observe that the government, through the budget released on Tuesday, has provided ongoing support in those portfolio areas.

**MR HANSON:** Chief Minister, can you outline any specific initiatives that are in the budget for veterans or seniors?

**MR BARR:** There are millions of dollars allocated in the portfolio areas and in the directorates—many ongoing initiatives. There are not new initiatives in every area in every budget.

### **Business—support**

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the Minister for Business and Better Regulation. The government’s ChooseCBR scheme last December was supposed to help struggling small businesses but had to be extended because the uptake was so low, with less than half of the \$500,000 claimed. Business owners criticised the scheme, saying that it was confusing and that some customers with vouchers did not spend much extra, while Canberra Business Chamber executive Graham Catt said it should have been extended to microbusinesses also. Minister, how do you respond to the Canberra Business Chamber, which said it had hoped for more measures in Tuesday’s budget to support local businesses?

**MS CHEYNE:** ChooseCBR was an ambitious scheme and it was a trial. It was the very first time that we had done anything like that in the ACT. As I said earlier today, \$310,000 of discounts were redeemed in a very short period of time. This was less than the \$500,000 allocated but it is nothing to be sneezed at, and the multiplier effect

was 6.3—so \$1.9 million contributed overall to the ACT economy. I have outlined a number of measures that are throughout the budget that are supporting local businesses. I did it earlier, in response to several questions from my own colleagues. So I refer the member to my previous answer. In relation to ChooseCBR, we have had feedback and we have been listening. We will be updating the scheme, and I look forward to having more to say about that in the coming months, when \$2 million of it is rolled out.

**MS CASTLEY:** Was a review of the ChooseCBR trial done? If so, what did it find and when will we get to see that information?

**MS CHEYNE:** I thank Ms Castley for the question. I do not think I thanked her earlier. Yes, there is a review underway in the directorate at the moment. It is not a formal review. I do not expect that there will be something that will be published. But we have been taking advice from businesses that have reached out to us and some businesses to which we have reached out. A survey was conducted towards the end of last year. We have heard from peak bodies like the Canberra Business Chamber.

One example of things that I would like to see done differently is better visual cues. While we made changes to the website that helped to improve it, including adding a map, there were perhaps improvements that we could have had at some of the shopfronts for people, if they were going from shop to shop, so that they would have known that they could use their discounts at an available shop. That is certainly something that we will be doing differently with the further rollout.

**MR CAIN:** Minister, given that \$2 million has been allocated to the scheme, which will continue this year, what will change so that it actually helps small business?

**MS CHEYNE:** I do not quite agree with the entire premise of the question. I think that \$310,000 of government expenditure that had a 6.3 multiplier effect did help businesses. We also extended the scheme until Christmas Eve, and I think we had, overall, a pretty good response from businesses and from take-up: 336 businesses participated in the scheme. We will be looking to increase that amount. I refer the member to some of my previous responses about how we will be improving the scheme to see greater take-up from businesses and consumers.

### **Waste—bulky waste collection**

**MS ORR:** My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. Can you outline what the fast-track of the bulky waste service rollout will mean for Canberrans?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Ms Orr for her question. I was very pleased to announce last week that the bulky waste collection service will be fast-tracked to all Canberra suburbs by July this year. This follows on from the successful trial of the service in both Gungahlin and Tuggeranong, which commenced on 1 July 2020. Our government is getting on with the job of delivering the bulky waste collection service to the whole of Canberra, doing what we said we would do at the election.

Last week I joined my colleague Minister Cheyne in the suburb of Macquarie, along

with local residents Michael and Jacinta, who were very excited to see the service arriving sooner than expected. Michael previously had to borrow a car and trailer to get bulky waste to the tip. With the fast-track of the rollout, Belconnen residents like Michael will be able to access the service from 1 April to make it easier to recycle and get rid of unwanted hard waste from the kerb. Residents in Molonglo, Hall, Woden, Weston, the inner north and the inner south will then have collections commencing from 1 July.

Some suburbs were not originally due to receive this service until 2024, and I look forward to our government delivering more services for them almost three years ahead of schedule, in line with our election commitment. As demonstrated in the budget this week, in 2021 we are getting on with the job and delivering better services for Canberrans.

**MS ORR:** Minister, what types of materials are Canberrans currently disposing of through the service?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Ms Orr for her supplementary and her interest in recycling. It has been about seven months since the first bulky waste collections took place in Canberra and we are now getting a much better picture of the type of bulky waste or hard rubbish that Canberrans are leaving out on their kerb, in Gungahlin and Tuggeranong in particular but also through the concession cardholder scheme, which has always been in place around Canberra.

Several hundred tonnes of material have been collected in Tuggeranong and Gungahlin, with 6,000 pieces of furniture collected, almost 6,000 items of scrap timber and metal, 2,000 appliances and 2,000 pieces of electrical equipment, along with thousands of garden tools, camping equipment and building materials.

This is a good opportunity to remind Canberrans that the items that can be collected include furniture, tools, timber, whitegoods, building materials, metal products, electrical equipment including those with batteries removed, blankets, linen, manchester, lighting, automotive parts—fuel and batteries removed, of course—camping and outdoor equipment, as well televisions and computers. We are looking forward to other Canberrans being able to benefit from the service and putting those out to be recycled.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Minister, what happens after these materials are collected?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Mr Pettersson for his supplementary. In addition to providing an easier way for Canberrans to dispose of unwanted materials, resource recovery is also an important objective of the service. We have set quite a high resource recovery target of 30 per cent for these items, meaning that we want at least 30 per cent of the collected materials to find a new home, rather than ending up in landfill. So far, the service is achieving a recovery rate of 38.8 per cent, which is a great result and exceeds rates achieved by many local councils around Australia.

Items collected are sorted, recovered and recycled, where possible, to maximise the diversion to landfill. That is also being achieved through new trucks, which sees those items separated on the truck. To do this the ACT government has also partnered with

charities, including St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army, to give them the first choice of items that can then go to those in need or be sold through their charity shopfronts.

We are also the first government in Australia that has partnered with GIVIT to link people in need who have identified that they want something in particular, so we will provide that through the bulky waste collection service as well. Popular items for these charities include furniture, bikes and gardening equipment, which are always able to find a new home. Indeed, in just the last three months of the service 1,800 pieces of furniture, 400 appliances, 275 electrical items and 250 pieces of outdoor equipment have been recovered and rehomed. This is a great result. We hope to see even more items being rehomed, with the service expanding to even more suburbs across Canberra, and I look forward to updating the Assembly as it progresses.

**Mr Barr:** Madam Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the notice paper.