



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2022–2023](#))

Members:

**MR M PETTERSSON (Chair)
MS N LAWDER (Deputy Chair)**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2023

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms K Langham (Ph: 620 75498)**

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.

APPEARANCES

Community Services Directorate.....29

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.01 am.

Appearances:

Cheyne, Ms Tara, Assistant Minister for Economic Development, Minister for the Arts, Minister for Business and Better Regulation, Minister for Human Rights and Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director General

Akhter, Ms Sanzida, Executive Branch Manager, Women, Youth and Multicultural Affairs, Communities

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to this public hearing of the education and community inclusion committee inquiry into annual and financial reports 2022-23. The committee will today examine the annual report of the Community Services Directorate.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of the city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses use these words, "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We now welcome Ms Tara Cheyne MLA, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and officials. I remind all witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. 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. Could I please ask each of you to confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to comply with it?

Ms Cheyne: Yes, we have read and understand the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We do not have opening statements, so I will start the questioning. Minister, how is the ACT government supporting Israeli and Palestinian communities in the ACT in light of recent events?

Ms Cheyne: Obviously, the Israel-Gaza crisis is incredibly distressing globally, and our community is not immune from that, either. We have been engaging very closely with the Department of Home Affairs and with Minister Giles, including meeting online, as well as a multicultural affairs ministers meeting a week and a half ago, where we received briefings from a range of different officials about community safety and cohesion, and heard from other jurisdictions about what they are doing and

shared what we are doing.

Pleasingly, the most significant investment that is occurring is from the federal government, which will flow through to the ACT. It is in its early stages but they have announced a \$50 million commitment of a social cohesion package. It is a \$25 million grant to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry to immediately improve safety at Jewish schools and preschools across Australia, as well as \$25 million to Australian Palestinian, Muslim and other communities to support a range of safety, security, mental health, cohesion and education objectives.

That is in addition to \$3 million over two years for targeted mental health and community wellbeing support services to address psychological harm and community distress, \$6 million for mental health and wellbeing support to students in Jewish and Islamic schools, and \$12.8 million over four years to protect Australians from terrorist and violent extremist online content.

That is in addition to another \$50 million commitment for 177 grants that the commonwealth government is providing under the Securing Faith-Based Places grants program. I am pleased to say that, in the ACT, four organisations will be receiving that: the ACT Jewish community; the Christian City Church in Belconnen; the Islamic Practice and Dawah Circle Incorporated; and Life Unlimited Church.

Importantly, we already have supports and services in place through our Human Rights Commission, which can investigate and conciliate occasions of racial discrimination. There are a range of ways that people can make a complaint to the Human Rights Commission. They can call 6205 2222; they can email; there is an online web form; and there is also a translation and interpreting service. The Human Rights Commission has been undertaking a very strong body of work over the last little while regarding reaching out to community, especially via radio in different languages and letting the community know about what services are available.

We also have our multicultural participation grants, which are open right now. Our Multiculturalism Act came into force earlier this year. A key component is that all directorates across the ACT government need to comply with the charter and the reporting obligations associated with that.

There is a range of work underway. I would reflect that, in the ACT, of course, there have been protests. Those protests have been peaceful, which is very pleasing to see, and we hope that that continues. Of course, people have a right to protest. In terms of antisemitism, the only report that has been made to me so far has been of some graffiti. That report was made to my office, as a local member, from a constituent, just yesterday, and we have immediately referred that to TCCS to be removed.

MS LAWDER: You referred to the \$25 million, and \$25 million in federal grants. Do you know, with the community centres in the ACT, which areas might receive some funding? If they are not getting any of that funding, what can the ACT government do to support those who feel they need extra security?

Ms Cheyne: It is early days, Ms Lawder. We would like to know as well, and we certainly put that question to Minister Giles at the multicultural affairs meeting and to

officials since the announcement, which was made less than about three weeks ago. Officials are still working through that. I understand that funding will be direct rather than through an application process. We will look to get a better understanding of exactly who is receiving that and try to identify if there are any gaps, to see whether we need to fill those gaps.

MS LAWDER: Some other organisations like the Hindu temple are concerned about security. I think Mr Cain has received some input from them about their concerns regarding burglaries they have had there. Who is responsible for that? Is it the police minister or the Minister for Multicultural Affairs? Who would be the best person to deal with those issues?

Ms Cheyne: It would certainly be something to be referred to police. The Securing Faith-Based Places grants, I understand, is a regular grants program. It was bolstered this year. I think that the original commitment was \$40 million and another \$10 million was added to it. I would expect that that application process will be opening again next year. I would certainly encourage any community organisation that is a faith-based place to apply for those grants from the federal government and to engage with police.

MS LAWDER: That is a grants process. What happens if they are not successful in that grants process—the Hindu temple specifically? How is it allocated? Is it based on the number of burglaries that they have had?

Ms Cheyne: I cannot speak to the commonwealth grant process, Ms Lawder. Those questions are probably best directed to Minister Giles.

MR CAIN: What is the action? You have mentioned the commonwealth's grant scheme but what is the ACT government doing to directly assist these communities?

Ms Cheyne: I answered that, Mr Cain, in my answer to Mr Pettersson.

MR CAIN: In particular, the Florey temple has contacted me several times about repeated burglaries. What is the ACT government doing to assist that community?

Ms Cheyne: I do not believe that I have had a representation from the Florey temple, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: It is in your electorate.

Ms Cheyne: What is your point?

MR CAIN: You are not aware of that?

Ms Cheyne: I do not believe I have received a representation, Mr Cain. If I have, I will correct the record. I certainly have not received a representation from you, as far as I am aware.

MR CAIN: They have had repeated burglaries.

Ms Cheyne: If it is not brought to my attention, Mr Cain, I cannot make the appropriate referral. I would hope that the temple has been engaging with ACT Policing, who are best placed to assist them and best placed to perhaps advise them about what support programs are available.

The commonwealth government is best placed with its grants program. This has been running for years in order to support community organisations with the appropriate infrastructure. I am not aware of whether the Florey temple have applied for that grant funding, and I would encourage them to do so.

MR CAIN: I am surprised that there have been repeated break-ins at a significant Hindu temple in your electorate and, as multicultural affairs minister, you are not aware of that. I am very surprised to hear that.

Ms Cheyne: I do not know what I do not know, Mr Cain.

MS LAWDER: As I understand it, Mr Cain has written to the minister for police about this issue. Would you expect that there would be leakage from the minister for police to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs to let you know about this type of thing or is it very siloed?

Ms Cheyne: I would not describe it as siloed, but I think the police minister is best placed to engage with that organisation. The Office of Multicultural Affairs is largely about policy and grant programs, as well as the festival, whereas responses to burglaries naturally fit within the police minister's portfolio.

MR CAIN: It does not fall within your policy consideration that these centres should be safe and free from burglaries?

Ms Cheyne: Of course, it does, Mr Cain. We denounce any attacks on any institution, whether it is burglaries, graffiti, racist attacks or vilification. We would absolutely denounce and not support any of that. I find this a very strange line of questioning, if you have written to the police minister but did not write to me at the same time.

MR CAIN: I am very surprised that you, as multicultural affairs minister, and particularly as it is something that occurred in your electorate, are not aware of these concerns being expressed to me, in my shadow capacity.

Ms Cheyne: I am very surprised, Mr Cain, that if you think I am responsible, you did not write to me at the same time as you wrote to the police minister. I would ask you to reflect on your own actions.

MR CAIN: The police minister never reached out to you as the appropriate minister and local member? Are you surprised by that?

Ms Cheyne: No, Mr Cain, because you did not cc me. This is just bizarre.

MR CAIN: You are in government. The police minister is in government with you. How are you not talking to each other about matters that affect your portfolio?

Ms Cheyne: Mr Cain, you did not write to me. This is just—

MR CAIN: And your police minister did not contact you.

Ms Cheyne: This is beyond farcical.

MR CAIN: That is very strange.

Ms Cheyne: I am really not sure that this is a good use of time.

MR CAIN: Very strange.

THE CHAIR: Members, we only have a short period of time. I think this line of questioning is getting quite circular, and it is less questioning and more comment at this point. Ms Lawder, do you have a substantive?

MS LAWDER: Sure. It is related but not continuing per se. What is the ACT government specifically doing, through the Multicultural Hub or otherwise, to support and integrate refugees who may be coming from the Middle East, Ukraine, Armenia or any other area? Which area of the Multicultural Hub is most involved in that?

Ms Cheyne: With the Multicultural Hub, are you talking about mHub, the organisation, or are you asking about what the government is doing?

MS LAWDER: The ACT government and the ACT Multicultural Hub, which you may not answer because it is not you, necessarily.

Ms Cheyne: I can certainly try and be as helpful as possible. The ACT government has been doing what we can to support our Ukraine and Afghanistan refugees in particular. Ukraine's visa process is different from that of Afghanistan, and that results in some slightly different approaches.

Over the last few years—and it is in the budget again this year—we have provided grants to help refugees and those from Ukraine to settle in housing, to secure permanent housing. Those are about \$5,000 per family, and it has been very successful in helping those families to get secure housing. That is delivered through the Red Cross. The Red Cross is essentially the agent in the ACT that supports those families coming here.

One of the most difficult issues that there is probably not huge awareness of is that it is very difficult for anyone to leave Gaza at the moment. In terms of humanitarian arrivals, there have been very few. The Australian government's focus, naturally, has been on Australians in the first instance and getting people home. But we stand ready to assist however we can with people who are displaced from those communities and who are looking to reach Australia.

In terms of supports for integration, cohesion and engaging with the community, the ACT government has a range of different programs. Probably our most successful is the Work Experience and Support Program. This has been going for decades, and it provides people who have arrived in Australia or the ACT with a TAFE qualification,

so they get four weeks of office work training, together with eight weeks of work experience in the ACT government. They graduate from that program with a written reference and with skills. We have found repeatedly that having relevant local experience is a major driver of success for persons wishing to gain employment in the ACT. That program is something we are very proud to run and keep running.

In terms of mHub's work, I will hand over to Ms Akhter.

Ms Akhter: MHub provides us with two services. One is the integrated welcome to Canberra support services and the other one is the multicultural workforce participation program. Under the welcome to Canberra support services, mHub host a website which assists new migrants to settle in the ACT. Their website directs them to all of the services; also, there are some in-house services that mHub provides.

We have some statistics because we have reviewed the program. In 2022 the welcome to Canberra website received 1,121 visits from 928 unique visitors across 58 countries, with Australia accounting for the majority, which equals around 57 per cent, and 52 per cent of those visits were actually located in the ACT. The website also had 398 unique international visits, mainly from Asia.

The current welcome to Canberra contract that we have with mHub will continue until we undertake another review and see how that goes.

The workforce participation program is designed to work with a wide range of vulnerable clients from CALD backgrounds seeking employment opportunities. Since the program's inception in 2014, a total of 1,498 participants from CALD backgrounds have registered with the program and were recommended to potential employers. Of those, 1,067 participants found work. We see this program as a great success and a pretty good program to support our migrant communities and any with multicultural backgrounds.

Across the life of the program to date, the data suggests that 71 per cent of participants who register were successful in securing employment. These are the two funded services we have with mHub.

MS LAWDER: You mentioned that you will continue funding them until you do a review. Do they have an open-ended, ongoing funding agreement, or is it a one-year, three-year—

Ms Akhter: No, there is a certain time limit. In 2024 we will review the contract; then we will see what improvements we can bring and work together with them.

MS LAWDER: Is that a one-year, three-year or four-year—

Ms Akhter: No, it is a multiyear contract, but with a certain review period inbuilt within it.

MS LAWDER: For how many years was the multiyear contract?

Ms Akhter: Initially, the contract was running to early this year; then, because we

undertook a review, we have extended it until early next year, and at that point—

MS LAWDER: When did the contract start?

Ms Akhter: When did it start?

MS LAWDER: How many years was the contract for?

Ms Cheyne: Several. I think it was two or three.

Ms Rule: We might have to take that question on notice.

Ms Akhter: Three.

MS LAWDER: I do not have a problem with it being extended. I just wanted to know how long it was for.

Ms Cheyne: Yes, we understand; thank you.

MS LAWDER: You have two services provided by the ACT government. Under that contract, is it a bulk of money or do you give a certain amount per service and direct how the funding should be used?

Ms Akhter: It is the second one, yes.

MR CAIN: I have a line of questions on your broken promise with respect to a multicultural venue and refurbishment of the Fitzroy Pavilion. Are you expecting to meet your promise on delivering the upgrade to the Fitzroy Pavilion within the one-year time frame, as outlined in this year's budget?

Ms Cheyne: Yes.

MR CAIN: Will the venue have digital booking available?

Ms Cheyne: You would need to direct that to Venues Canberra.

MR CAIN: I beg your pardon?

Ms Cheyne: You would need to direct that to Venues Canberra, within the portfolio that is responsible.

MR CAIN: Could you take that question on notice?

Ms Cheyne: No.

MR CAIN: It is a supposed multicultural venue.

Ms Cheyne: It is not. It is a question for Venues Canberra, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: You do not know the answer?

Ms Cheyne: It is a question for Venues Canberra, which is managing the process.

MR CAIN: Do you know the answer or do you not know the answer?

Ms Cheyne: I do not know the answer, Mr Cain, because I am not responsible.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, if you are going down repetitive lines of questioning that are not particularly helpful to the committee, I will cut you off. If you do have lines of questioning, I am happy to let you go.

MR CAIN: I certainly do. Minister, if you had delivered on your promise to build a dedicated \$21 million multicultural venue, 10,000 square metres in size, how many visitors would that venue have been able to accommodate?

Ms Cheyne: That is a hypothetical question, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: Could you take that on notice, please?

Ms Cheyne: No, because under the standing orders hypothetical questions are disallowed.

MR CAIN: It is not hypothetical. There was a promise made to the ACT multicultural community—

Ms Cheyne: Mr Cain, I am not taking that on notice. That is ridiculous.

MR CAIN: for a \$21 million, 10,000 square metre venue, particularly to be made available to the multicultural community. That was a promise made by your government. How many did you anticipate would be able to be accommodated by such a venue?

Ms Cheyne: Mr Cain—

MR CAIN: That was a promise of your government, of your party.

Ms Cheyne: Are you going to let me answer or not?

MR CAIN: Would you take that on notice? When you made that promise to the multicultural community, how many people did you anticipate that would accommodate? That is not hypothetical. That is based on your own commitment to the electorate.

Ms Cheyne: We anticipated—

MR CAIN: Chair, I mean—

Ms Cheyne: Can I answer? That is ridiculous. You need to stop cutting me off and treating me in such a misogynistic way.

MR CAIN: There is nothing like that happening here.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: This was an explicit promise.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, please. If you are going to ask a question as a visitor to this committee, please allow the witness to answer it. If you continue to cut the witness off, I will ask you to leave.

MR CAIN: I am asking the minister—

THE CHAIR: What is the question?

MR CAIN: to comment on a promise from her government to the multicultural community for a \$21 million, 10,000 square metre venue. What was the anticipated space per number of people that that venue would accommodate? That is all I am asking about.

THE CHAIR: That is the question.

Ms Cheyne: Thank you.

MR CAIN: And the answer is?

Ms Cheyne: The answer is that we would consider that it would be able to host up to 1,000 people, or 1,500 standing, and that the Fitzroy refurbishment should be able to deliver something very similar.

MR CAIN: Have you actually done the calculations? You said “something very similar”, but what capacity would the Fitzroy refurbishment provide? Do you have numbers for that rather than—

Ms Cheyne: Yes. One thousand guests in a banquet seating arrangement, and 1,500 standing guests.

MR CAIN: You are saying that the Fitzroy Pavilion refurbishment will accommodate the same number of people as the promised 10,000 square metre, \$21 million facility?

Ms Cheyne: That is my understanding, Mr Cain, but you would need to direct that question to Venues Canberra.

MR CAIN: Will partitioning be available in the refurbished Fitzroy Pavilion? Will partitioning be available if visitors would like to hold smaller events?

Ms Cheyne: This was one of the challenges that was identified which resulted in us going ahead with the Fitzroy Pavilion, Mr Cain. In designing the new event building, it became apparent that, while a venue of this size could be subdivided, it would be very costly to build and operate, meaning higher costs for hirers, including those paying concessional rates. Because of these challenges, this is exactly why we have

gone with the Fitzroy Pavilion. In terms of functionality and partitioning, that is subject to what we have heard from the community.

As you may be aware, Venues Canberra, supported by the Community Services Directorate, hosted a range of groups about the design and functionality of the Fitzroy Pavilion. I believe your adviser attended one of those. In the last few months, the ACT Multicultural Advisory Council and the National Multicultural Festival organisers have been consulted as well, in addition to those public sessions. It is that input that will be used to finalise the design and the approach to the market for upgrades.

MR CAIN: Just—

THE CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Cain; we are out of time.

MR CAIN: I do have a point of order, Chair; a significant point of order.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: We are not, actually. The minister referred to me as a misogynist.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain—

MR CAIN: Could you ask the minister to withdraw that comment? She referred to me as a misogynist. Could you ask her to withdraw that comment? That is unparliamentary language, to say the least.

THE CHAIR: Let me check the transcript. I cannot recall—

MR CAIN: She said it was a misogynist question, as if I were a misogynist.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, I appreciate—

MR CAIN: That is insulting and unparliamentary, and it is contempt of this committee.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain—

Ms Cheyne: You are not a member of it.

MR CAIN: I am a visitor to this committee.

THE CHAIR: Members, please! I appreciate that there are some tensions.

MR CAIN: Ms Lawder might confirm. I believe it was a statement she made.

MS LAWDER: Yes.

THE CHAIR: We are not having—

MR CAIN: Yes, it was a statement she made. She needs to withdraw it.

THE CHAIR: I cannot recall the exact words we used 10 minutes ago.

MR CAIN: Did you say that I was a misogynist, Minister? Did you say I asked a misogynist question?

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain—

MR CAIN: She did.

THE CHAIR: I am trying to close the committee proceedings. On behalf of the committee—

MR CAIN: We still have a minute to go.

THE CHAIR: The next session is supposed to start in 30 seconds. On behalf of the committee, I thank the minister and officials for your attendance today. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard for their support. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. If a member wishes to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliament portal as soon as practicable, and no later than five business days after the hearing. This meeting is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 9.29 am.