



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2021-2022](#))

Members:

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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 3 NOVEMBER 2022

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr A Chynoweth (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.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.30 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

Murray, Ms Christine, Executive Branch Manager, Women, Youth and Multicultural Affairs

THE CHAIR: Welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion inquiry into annual and financial reports 2021-22. In the proceedings today we will examine the annual report for the Community Services Directorate.

Before we begin, on behalf of the committee, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of the city and this region.

Please be aware that 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 as a question taken on notice."

In this session we will hear from the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Ms Cheyne, and her officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. When you speak for the first time, could you please acknowledge that you have read the privilege statement?

I will lead off with the first question. Minister, in the last financial year the federal government responded to the respective crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine by offering humanitarian visas. What has the ACT government done to help these people settle into the ACT?

Ms Cheyne: I confirm that I have read, acknowledge and understand the privilege statement. You are right; the federal government has particularly been supporting people from Afghanistan and Ukraine, in addition to the broader humanitarian program, which includes other countries like Syria. The ACT government has been working closely to support those efforts.

Of particular note, in the last financial year a total of 152 evacuated Afghan people settled in Canberra, which represented 49 households. The figures are interesting, and I will try to talk about them in a way that makes sense. Of the 152 evacuees, 144 people, or 45 of those 49 households, were granted those 449 temporary humanitarian stay visas. The other eight people, representing four households, were already Australian

citizens or permanent residents, so they did not necessarily need a temporary visa. This reflects three per cent of the total number of people evacuated from Afghanistan who have arrived in Australia. I do not think that is too unusual, noting that in the ACT we do have a small Afghan population. It is much bigger particularly in Melbourne.

Very pleasingly, with all of those households and people, those 144 people who had been granted those 449 visas have now been granted permanent residency, thanks to the support of Legal Aid ACT.

Importantly, we have been working very closely with the Red Cross on permanent accommodation for these evacuees. Of course, as is understood, we are in a very difficult housing situation at the moment. Something that we have been offering, which I think is unusual or unique to the ACT, is a \$5,000 grant to these households to assist with those big lump-sum, upfront payments, i.e. bond. Of the 49 Afghan households, 29 now have permanent accommodation and have been supported with that grant.

With respect to Ukraine, we have been assisting in a similar way. The visa situation for those who are arriving from Ukraine is a little more complicated. We have made those family settlement grants for those bonds available to those families as well, and we have been able to assist 13 Ukrainian households or 34 individuals to be settled into long-term accommodation.

Overall, there were 263 people settled in the ACT under the humanitarian program in the last financial year, largely from Afghanistan—as I said, 152. This year the numbers so far have been much smaller. I will look to officials; I think we have the stats on this. The most have been from Syria so far. Again, the numbers have been quite small because of where we are in the year.

MR CAIN: Minister, is this the CRISP program that we have just been hearing about, the federal initiative?

Ms Cheyne: No. It is the humanitarian support program, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: The government CRISP program obviously has similar goals for resettlement of refugees. Could you provide an update on your engagement with this federal initiative?

Ms Cheyne: I think I have responded to this previously. The CRISP is allowing groups of everyday Australians to get involved in welcoming refugees into their local community from day one of their Australian journey. It is not something that state or territory governments sign up to. There are a number of small community groups in the ACT who have expressed interest in potentially sponsoring a refugee family through CRISP.

The last information that I had—and this meeting may have happened; I will check—was that we were arranging for the CEO of CRISP to present at our ACT Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Humanitarian Coordination Committee to provide some more information, particularly noting that that coordination committee is our peak body for supporting humanitarian entrants.

MR CAIN: When is that briefing likely to happen?

Ms Cheyne: Next week, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: Is that something that other MLAs could participate in?

Ms Cheyne: Generally not, but I am sure that you can reach out to the CEO of CRISP and ask for a briefing, if you wish.

MS LAWDER: For the purposes of transparency, a Ukrainian refugee family has been staying with me for a few months. You say that you work closely with the federal government with these refugees. Is there any fee relief if they are getting licences and those types of things?

Ms Cheyne: Yes, absolutely, Ms Lawder. Again the ACT is very proud to offer the ACT services access card. That is particularly to assist eligible asylum seekers to gain smooth access to a range of—

MS LAWDER: On a humanitarian visa?

Ms Cheyne: I will check; yes. Essentially, it assists them to gain smooth access to a range of subsidised essential services. They just get that card once. I understand that it is through Companion House. That card is issued to them. Companion House is the only service provider. From there, if they are in insecure or unpaid work, not allowed to work or otherwise facing severe hardship, they are able to use that card to gain access to discounted or indeed completely subsidised services.

MR DAVIS: Minister, obviously, there was a lot of disappointment in the community that the Multicultural Festival needed to be postponed for two years due to the pandemic. Can you talk me through some of the work that is being done to make sure that the 2023 festival is a success, and what additional investments or preparation we need to put in, based on the pandemic in the last two years?

Ms Cheyne: Thank you, Mr Davis. That is a wide-ranging question.

MR DAVIS: I put a few supplementaries in there.

Ms Cheyne: Yes, sure. If I skip any point, please draw my attention back to it. Yes, the 2023 festival is going ahead, from 17 to 19 February. Can I take a moment to thank our extraordinary team and all of our stakeholders, who have been working very hard. I note particularly the interest and excitement from the community again.

From a budget perspective, there is significant additional investment into the festival to support a whole range of different things, particularly in light of a larger footprint that we announced, when we announced the dates. We will be formally expanding into Glebe Park. You might recall that, in previous years Glebe Park has been activated to a smaller extent, in the top corner, but it will be much bigger this time. That is to take into account that City Walk in the last few years has been completely transformed. Whereas we would have had a large number of stalls through there, it would be very difficult, particularly in terms of flow. It will still be a CBD-based festival, with

Glebe Park.

The expansion of that footprint is where some of that funding is going, in addition to making sure that the connection to Glebe Park is very strong. In previous years it has been the city, Glebe Park and then empty space between there. Along Akuna Street, it will be much stronger there.

The funding has also contributed to making sure that we do have that COVID-safe environment. We will still be seeing instances of COVID next year. That is a fact. It is about making sure that we do still have some of that support in place.

Importantly, our National Multicultural Festival Grants Program has been doubled. Usually, it is a grant program of \$90,000; this year it is \$180,000. Stallholders, performers, some commercial entities and parade participants were all invited to submit their application, as well as their grant application, a few months ago. That work is being finalised and the announcement of that is imminent. It contains a few different moving parts, and we want to announce it all at once, so that everyone understands what role they have and what they are being funded for, if they are successful in receiving a grant. That will be happening this month.

We have also been working very hard to ensure this remains very much a community-led festival, taking into account some feedback from previous years that it had started to get a little bit of a commercial bent to it. Critically, we established late last year a community panel reference group. That has been very important for us. Those members are Giovanni Alvarez-Cano. All of these names are probably familiar to you. He is a representative of the ACT Latin American community. Malcolm Buchanan is the president of the Scottish Heritage Council. Toa Takaiari is the founder of the Pacific Islander Showcase, and Chin Wong of CMCF has also had a very strong role in the festival for a long period of time. Previously, Jenny Mobbs was also in that group; she has taken a step back due to other commitments.

That groups has met, I think, six times so far this year. I have met with them as well. They have been central to helping us map out the footprint and also entertainment and other programming. I do have in my calendar for later this month a meeting with showcase leaders, once that is announced in the coming weeks. There is lots of work underway, but we are looking forward to an anniversary festival that is fitting for a 25th anniversary.

MR DAVIS: Taking on board your point that it is important to keep it as a community event and risk the commercialisation, there is still obviously a substantial economic benefit to Canberra hosting the festival. There are two years of pent-up demand and an increased footprint. Have there been any additional investments or plans to promote the festival—not just that it is back on but perhaps more widely, so that more people, even more Australians, consider coming to Canberra to see the festival?

Ms Cheyne: Yes, I think that work will begin in earnest once we make those announcements of all the participants. There are a few different things that happen from there. First, there is organic promotion from all of our participants with their communities. That is some of the most successful promotion. We certainly do what we can to promote it.

You are right, though, about the pent-up demand. There is already a lot of interest. With the Facebook event, a significant number of people have already clicked that they are going along. If you have not done so yet, I encourage you to do so. Ms Murray might be able to add something further about the promotion activities.

Ms Murray: Thank you very much for the question. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. It is absolutely the case, as the minister has outlined, that there is a huge amount of positive push-in and reach-in engagement seeking to access, through the community channels, our community engagement on the National Multicultural Festival.

However, we have been delighted to be able to work across government, across all of the ACT government, and work with an internal steering group to support a robust communications and promotional strategy. Obviously, it is not the time or the place to make any announcements, but I would like to assure the committee that we are working collaboratively with really good experts and ACT government experts in this area, to make sure that we are promoting not only in the ACT, in the region, but broader than that.

Ms Cheyne: We have also been working very closely with the City Renewal Authority. They have always been good partners with us, but this is a very deliberate partnership. I particularly note that there are impacts on the CBD, but we have been working through with the tenants within the CBD, the major tenant being the Canberra Centre, how we can make this a symbiotic relationship, so that everyone benefits from that. Of course, Civic Square is a key precinct that gets activated, so we are working closely with the theatre. The CRA also has a different promotion network, which we really value.

MR CAIN: Minister, I refer to the stages of implementing promise 15.2 in the parliamentary agreement, which reads:

Construct a large new multicultural events venue at EPIC for cultural performances and available for hire for large private functions, such as weddings.

What is your engagement on this promise, and where are we up to at the moment?

Ms Cheyne: Thank you, Mr Cain. I think we have covered this extensively before, and I am happy to go through it again. This will be a very important meeting event and performance space. I can confirm that it will provide top-quality cooking and catering facilities and a covered exhibition space. This will be a venue that is appropriate for multicultural gatherings, but it will not be used solely by the multicultural community. It will be one offering in our presence of offerings across the community.

Importantly, this is a project that is led by Venues Canberra, within the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, which owns the project, and Major Projects Canberra is delivering it. Under the administrative arrangements, the Chief Minister is responsible for the project. There is a steering committee for the redevelopment project, and it consists of membership from my directorate, the Community Services Directorate, as well as Major Projects Canberra, the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, and Transport Canberra and

City Services.

A tender for design and a technical consultant was sought in August. It closed in September, and it is expected to be announced shortly. I am regularly briefed by staff in the directorate about their engagement with the steering committee.

Importantly, the multicultural community has been identified as one of the key stakeholders to be consulted as part of that design process. I am sure we all look forward to that kicking off once that consultant is appointed.

MR CAIN: Given that the commitment was made over two years ago, can you explain why it has taken so long to put out a tender just for the design of the facility?

Ms Cheyne: Mr Cain, there was funding in the 2021-22 budget. It is my understanding that that budget funding was appropriated over two years; so we are still within that two-year time frame.

MR CAIN: Is there any estimation of when the venue will be absolutely completed and available to the community?

Ms Cheyne: Mr Cain, that question is appropriate for the Chief Minister. I am not the lead minister.

Ms Rule: Chair, if we may, can Ms Murray clarify some evidence given earlier about visa status?

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Ms Murray: I wanted to confirm, as the minister noted earlier, that the visa status of Ukrainian refugees is slightly different. I wanted to clarify, and make sure it was clear, that that is not one that is necessarily given direct access to the access card. There is a variety of supports that are available specifically for that. I wanted to clarify that for the record.

Ms Cheyne: Ms Lawder, we are happy to talk with you offline about what other supports might be able to be provided.

MS LAWDER: Thanks.

MR CAIN: Minister, last month I raised with you in the Assembly that the CALD average public service salary is well below the ACT public service salary. The gap has widened steadily since 2017. In 2017, the disparity was nearly \$4,000 and in 2022 it was \$8½ thousand. You answered my question by saying that it is because members of the CALD community, on average, have less or lower paid jobs. That is a rather obvious way of saying the same thing—that their average wage is lower. Do you have any plans to address this disparity?

Ms Cheyne: With this question, given that it is from the *State of the service report*, it is probably best directed to the Head of Service. I am happy to discuss with you what is occurring across the public service. Twenty-three per cent of the ACT public service

identify as culturally and linguistically diverse, which has been steady growth from 2017-18, when the figure was 17.9 per cent.

It is important to note that, yes, some people are in lower paying jobs, but that can be for a variety of reasons, including that some of the jobs are entry level. What supports that, for example, is that 58 per cent of CALD employees have been in the public service for less than five years. That compares to 48 per cent of the public service overall.

That steady growth and the higher than average recruitment rates, together with that lower length of service, potentially places those staff at lower pay increments compared with the average. Indeed I think I flagged that the highest number of CALD staff workers is nurses, followed by administrative officers and general services officers.

The insourcing of school cleaning in the Education Directorate was our preference for internal resourcing action. That has meant that the direct employment of school cleaners has provided secure work. Overall, you would see that that is generally at that lower level of pay.

There is a range of work occurring across the ACT public service to support culturally and linguistically diverse employees. It includes a progressive inclusion strategy. That is for developing a whole-of-government inclusion strategy that is designed to build on our evidence base to identify and address systemic barriers to inclusion.

With more education resources, these are about designing shared education resources and a central information hub to capitalise on existing networks, build stronger linkages across directorates and to help reduce duplication in activities across the public service. There are targeted programs to expand strategic workforce programs that engage in diverse areas and assist career development, enhanced evaluation, strengthening evaluation and reporting capability based on contemporary data and analysis, and a pathway to secure work, ensuring that insecure employees who qualify for assessment for a secure workforce conversation or conversion are provided with that pathway for more permanent forms of employment in the territory.

In addition, of course, we have the Multiculturalism Bill, which will hopefully soon be an act. That includes within it, as I am sure you are aware, a charter. Each year all directorates across the public service will need to report on how they are enacting the principles of the charter.

There is a range of work underway to ensure that we are working on addressing this.

Ms Rule: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. In terms of the Community Services Directorate, our employment rate of people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background was around 18½ per cent in the last financial year, which is slightly below the whole of ACT public service rates. Given the nature of our work, I truly believe that we should reflect the diversity of the community that we serve, so we have made some decisions to dedicate some specific resources to driving further diversity amongst our employees, including culturally and linguistically diverse employees. In this financial year, we will develop and implement a diversity strategy, to make sure that we are leading the ACT public service on this front. As I said, given the nature of our services, I truly believe we should reflect our community.

MR CAIN: Could you take on notice a breakdown of the ACTPS level for CALD staff members across the ACT public service?

Ms Rule: I cannot take it on notice across the ACT public service because that is a question for the Chief Minister's department, but I can take it on notice for CSD.

MR CAIN: CSD, for your directorate, a breakdown of the levels by the usual categories?

Ms Rule: Yes, we can do that.

Ms Cheyne: Mr Cain, you can find the answer to your broader question in the *State of the service report*. If not, you can direct that question to one of the Chief Minister's hearings with the Head of Service.

MR CAIN: I would be happy to get the CSD figures.

Ms Cheyne: CSD has taken it on notice, yes.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

MS LAWDER: With regard to CSD, do you collate information on under-employment of your CALD staff?

Ms Rule: I suspect that we do not. I will have to check with my people team. I suspect that we do not because, unlike some other directorates, we would not have a large number of casuals. Most of our staff are either employed on a full-time or part-time basis. Under-employment tends to be an issue in the contract or casual workforce. I would be surprised if we do collate that data.

THE CHAIR: In November 2021, Canberra attained established accreditation as a welcoming city. It is now working towards attaining advanced accreditation. What does this advanced accreditation entail and what work has been done to progress this?

Ms Cheyne: We are very proud to be not only a member but to have achieved an established level of accreditation. The advanced level of accreditation assesses our compliance with the first three categories of the welcoming city standard, which are leadership, social and cultural inclusion, and economic development. We are completing that assessment, and that is being made possible by an intergovernmental steering group, which is in the final stages of putting together that portfolio of evidence to submit. Once that occurs, it is reviewed by an expert external reviewer and, where possible, it will be supported by a similarly accredited council.

The reason that the welcoming city standard uses peer support for that is to encourage that knowledge sharing and cooperation between councils. We expect that that will occur; that portfolio will be submitted at the end of the year. It is usually about a three-month assessment process. If successful, it will be an accreditation for a period of three years.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. On that note, we are out of time. On behalf of the committee, thank you, Minister, and all officials, for your attendance today. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank everyone for being here, including the extra members. If witnesses have taken questions on notice today, could you please get those answers to the committee support office within five working days of the receipt of the uncorrected proof transcript? If members wish to lodge further questions on notice, please get those to the committee support office within five working days. The hearing is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 10.01 am.