



**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)

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 23 NOVEMBER 2023

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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

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate	<u>140</u>
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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 1.01 pm.

Appearances:

Barr, Mr Andrew, Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

Blount, Ms Wilhelmina, Executive Group Manager, Policy and Cabinet Division

Mehrton, Mr Andrew, Executive Branch Manager, Social Policy

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2022-23. The committee will today examine the annual report of the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development 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 used these words: "I will take that question on notice."

We now welcome Mr Andrew Barr, Chief Minister, and officials. Could you please acknowledge that you have read and acknowledge the privilege statement?

Witnesses: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. As we do not have any opening statements, we will launch into questions. Chief Minister, what work has been done so far on the evaluation of the Capital of Equality Strategy?

Mr Barr: Mr Mehrton, can you talk about that?

Mr Mehrton: Sure. There has been a range of work over the last 12 months, which I can talk through in their individual components. The first piece would be a community survey that we launched in November last year. I think the last time we appeared before this committee we had just launched that strategy. That ran from November until February of this year. We received 427 responses through that survey, which is not a massive number compared to some other surveys but, in the context of the community that we are surveying, we were very pleased with that response and have received a lot of valuable data out of that.

A couple of the other components that we have been working on over the last few months have been two community round tables where we have invited community

members and organisations to come and talk to us more openly and broadly about the issues that they are facing and what they would like to see in the strategy going forward. We are also, as you would expect, doing a review and a stocktake of all the actions that we have had under the first two action plans of the Capital of Equality Strategy to see whether there has been anything that we have been particularly successful on or anything that we have not completed to the extent that we would have liked to have completed over the last few years.

Through each of those components and the regular conversations we have with stakeholders like our advisory council and other organisations in the community that are delivering services, we are synthesising all of that information at the moment to build a more holistic picture of what has happened, particularly in the last action plan over the last two years but also since the strategy was first lodged in 2019. From there, we will take that forward with our other ACT government directorates to look at what the next strategy of the Capital of Equality might look like in the new year.

MS LAWDER: Was that the 2019-23 strategy?

Mr Mehrton: That is correct.

MS LAWDER: Where are you with the next strategy?

Mr Mehrton: The current strategy expires at the end of this year. So we are doing the thinking around what the next strategy might look like. I am probably not in a position to say in too much detail exactly when that might be ready or what might be included in it, but it will be informed by the work that we are doing on the evaluation of each of those components at the moment.

MS LAWDER: Will it be another five-year or four-year strategy?

Mr Barr: I would presume so—around that length. There is an event this afternoon, in fact, but—

MS LAWDER: And then there are one or more action plans?

Mr Mehrton: Two.

MS LAWDER: Two action plans. We talked about evaluation of the goals or objectives in the action plan. How many have been achieved?

Mr Mehrton: I would have to check the exact number, because there have been many, many actions. I think there were two in the first action plan that we had not completed either due to timing or resources, and they were considered a relatively low priority. We are working through finalising our assessment of the second action plan, because some of that work is still in play. By and large, though, most of those actions have been completed since we started.

MS LAWDER: If perhaps they do not get completed—you said there were two from the first action plan that were not completed—do they get rolled over to the next one?

Mr Barr: Broadly speaking, yes, unless events have moved on and overtaken them.

MS LAWDER: What is the budget associated with the development and implementation of the next strategy?

Mr Mehrton: It is all undertaken from within the existing resources of the office. There was a small amount of funding provided in the previous budget to support the evaluation of the strategy. But the development is just our core business within the office.

MS LAWDER: And you have been doing the evaluation in-house yourselves, or are you paying someone to do it?

Mr Mehrton: We have engaged an external consultant to support some of the analysis, particularly around the survey that was conducted. That was a relatively small piece. The rest of it is being done by the team.

MS LAWDER: For the next, upcoming strategy, will it have advice about the evaluation at the outset, so that you structure your strategy so it is easier to evaluate at the end?

Mr Mehrton: That will certainly be one of our objectives. When we set out to do the Capital of Equality Strategy to begin with, we had a fairly clear program logic—and you can see that in the way the strategy is laid out. But one of the issues that we face in this space is that there is not a great deal of data that is collected. We have talked, possibly in committees like this over the years, about gender, sexual orientation and sex characteristics data not being collected through surveys like the census or often other administrative data. So it was challenging when we first set out with that strategy to set indicators or metrics that we would measure against in the way that we would normally like to with whole-of-government strategies like this.

Part of the work that we have been doing since that strategy was released and through the different action plans, has been to improve the data that we collect either through supporting external surveys that specifically target LGBTIQ+ people and their experiences and a common data set being developed within the ACT government that will provide more consistency and clarity about when and what data should be collected by ACT agencies as well. That is available on the CMTEDD website if people are interested. That was formally endorsed earlier this year. We are in the process of working with a few agencies to pilot how that gets rolled out into different parts of ACT government.

So, at the moment, we are kind of in the foundational stage, in some respects, of making sure that that data starts to be collected, and we will make improvements in the next strategy, hopefully, about what some of those indicators and metrics might be going forward. But it is a work in progress to actually make that data available in the first place.

MS LAWDER: Did you mention earlier on that a lot of that data is not collected through the census?

Mr Mehrton: That is correct. It was not collected in the last census. There is some information, I think, on a same-sex cohabitation indicator that indicates whether people are in a same-sex marriage. But, for most of those other datapoints that we would look to for this strategy, a decision was taken at the commonwealth level not to include those in the previous census. There have been discussions between governments around planning for, I think, the 2026 census, and we expect that there will be more in that area.

MS LAWDER: So you have already engaged with the ABS or through the normal—

Mr Mehrton: Yes, that has been an ongoing conversation for many years. We just missed out last time but, hopefully, we will see more of that in the 2026 census. But, again, that data then will not be available until 2028 or thereabouts.

MS LAWDER: I hope or presume that there is broad agreement with the other states and territories for the collection of that sort of data.

Mr Barr: Yes. It was only the previous commonwealth government who were not supportive.

MS LAWDER: Can you talk a little bit about how the ministerial advisory council is involved in the development of the next strategy and/or the evaluation of the one we are in the middle of?

Mr Mehrton: Yes, certainly. There are about 13 members of the ministerial advisory council that we select from the community through application and then we take that to government for appointment. Approximately every second month, they will have a meeting that we provide secretariat support for. Those meetings are typically a mixture of business that the advisory council themselves will engage on and bring to us to bring to the government, but they will also be our sounding board for the work that we are doing both on long-term pieces of strategy and policy development but also reactive issues that might be emerging in the community.

We had a planning session that the chief attended with us a few months ago where they had an opportunity to reflect on the progress that had been made over the last couple of years as well as where they might want government to look at focusing in the next strategy when that is prepared. We also engage with them, as I say, on a regular basis about where our thinking is. When we get to the point of having a draft strategy, we typically will consult with them on what is in that strategy and whether they think there are any changes or tweaks that need to be made.

Mr Barr: The ministerial advisory council are holding a thinktank event this afternoon at 5.30 as part of the Spring Festival and they are opening that to the broader LGBTI community.

MS LAWDER: Can you tell me how the current tranche of Capital of Equality grants operate? Is it just the one round per year or are there several rounds?

Mr Mehrton: We are operating at about two rounds per year. Partly, that is to provide more timely opportunities for applicants to engage with the program; so it is not a

once-a-year all-or-nothing situation. That has been quite positive. Over the last couple of years, we have also had a larger amount through a temporary increase to the funding available for the Capital of Equality Grants Program. That larger pool of funding has also made it possible to hold multiple grant rounds each year.

Since that increase in funding, we have taken the opportunity to restructure that grants program, which used to be essentially one round of grants or set of guidelines each year, into three different streams, each with a couple of different objectives. The Connection Fund is what we would have traditionally funded in the past, where any community organisation or advocate could approach the government with an LGBTIQ+ event or project that we would assess all together. We have also established a new partnership and capacity building fund, which is looking at supporting emerging organisations in the community to develop their governance, their capability and their maturity so that they can have a more stable and firm footing going forward into the future to do the work that they do to support community.

We have separately set up a third stream, which is a much smaller stream, around LGBTIQ+ leadership grants. That is targeted at fairly small amounts of money for individuals in the community who might be upcoming leaders or advocates. We typically support them to attend conferences or training that will support their capability to go forward and do bigger and better things in the community.

MS LAWDER: So, generally speaking, there are two rounds in the year. What times of the year are the grants open?

Mr Mehrton: They range throughout the year for the different streams. We try to space them out a little bit. We are actually just coming to the tail end of a round for, I think, the Connection Fund stream. We are in the final stages of settling who will receive that. I do not recall the dates for the next round and whether they have been planned yet or not, but we do try and space it out, if only for our team who have to assess all the applications that we get.

MS LAWDER: Is it a manual assessment or is it an online assessment? Is there a portal with mandatory sort of criteria as the first part?

Mr Mehrton: There is, yes. We use a platform called SmartyGrants, which is what is used across most of the offices for grants like this. There is a process of submitting mandatory information and a bit of a pitch, which then gets assessed by a panel. We have done a fair bit of work over the last couple of years to try to make that process as smooth and user-friendly as we can for people that are not comfortable necessarily sitting down in front of a computer and putting in reams of information about their projects and their credentials.

The office has been running information sessions ahead of each round of grant funding for people that want to just come along and figure out if they are interested or not. We are also running grant writing sessions. They are short sessions—I think they are about an hour—where people can come along and find out what makes a good grant application and the kinds of things that the assessors might be looking for to support that decision-making. So, yes, it is an online based process, but we try to work with people to get the best applications that we can for the community as well.

MS LAWDER: And there was a pool of about 700,000 for the 2023 to—

Mr Mehrton: It is \$700,000 over two years. The base funding is \$100,000 per year, but we will have two years of \$350,000 each year.

Ms Blount: I was just going to add that the Connection Fund is the one that is coming to a close, and the next one is planned for March next year.

MS LAWDER: Sorry?

Ms Blount: The next grant round is planned for March.

MS LAWDER: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: The office is responsible for promoting Canberra as an LGBTIQ friendly city. Are there any measures of the efficacy of the office or the public sentiment as to how Canberra is perceived as an LGBTIQ+ friendly city?

Mr Mehrton: Off the top of my head, I am not aware of the data about Canberra externally to Canberra and how that is perceived. We certainly have tried to gauge our own community's perception of whether Canberra is a welcoming and inclusive city through the survey that I have conducted. I do not have quantitative data but, through a lot of the work that we have been doing around nation-leading reforms of legislation, we have engagement and feedback from a number of other jurisdictions about the way the ACT is perceived as being a place that is leading on a lot of this work and the legislative reform. I could not say whether people in Sydney or Melbourne think that Canberra is the most welcoming city at this stage, but certainly the data we have had from our local community is that they do feel that there are concerted efforts being made by the government and that Canberra is overall a safe, welcoming and inclusive city for LGBTIQ+ people.

Ms Blount: I would add that the team's work has been recognised in a number of awards—finalists in the recent IPAA Spirit of the Service Awards for the work on intersex legislation and also winners of the Darling Awards, which is linked to the Darlington Statement—associated with that work. So recognition is coming for specific pieces of work as well as the broader work in the community here.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful.

MS LAWDER: How many FTE are assigned to the office?

Mr Mehrton: There are 2½ FTE at the moment.

MS LAWDER: Is that expected to remain stable over the forward estimates—you are not looking to expand or contract?

Mr Mehrton: No, not from my perspective.

MS LAWDER: What are the specific roles that the 2.5 undertake?

Mr Mehrton: It is a mix of things. Everyone naturally does a little bit of everything. The 0.5 FTE was funded to support the variations in sex characteristics work specifically. We have another SOG B that is largely responsible for strategy development as well as administering all the grants programs and a SOG C that works with the team as well. Given the size of the team, everyone pitches in and has to do a little bit of everything. There is not a clear delineation of roles along any particular lines.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, thank you, Chief Minister, and officials for your attendance today. We would also like to thank Broadcasting and Hansard for their support, as always. 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. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 1.20 pm.