



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2022-2023

(Reference: [Inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2022-2023 and Appropriation
\(Office of the Legislative Assembly\) Bill 2022-2023](#))

Members:

**MR J MILLIGAN (Chair)
MR A BRADDOCK (Deputy Chair)
DR M PATERSON**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 12 AUGUST 2022

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr David Monk (Ph 620 50129)**

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

AMAR, MR KRANTI , Treasurer, Multicultural Association of Canberra	15
CATT, MR GRAHAM , Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Business Chamber	9
KILLEN, DR GEMMA , Head of Policy, ACT Council of Social Service	1
LAWLER, MR NICOLAS , Chief Executive Officer, Advocacy for Inclusion.....	23
PURI, MS NISHI , President, Multicultural Association of Canberra.....	15
WALLACE, MR CRAIG , Head of Policy, Advocacy for Inclusion	23

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 10 am.

KILLEN, DR GEMMA, Head of Policy, ACT Council of Social Service

THE CHAIR: I declare the meeting open. Welcome to the community day for the public hearings of the Select Committee on Estimates 2022-2023. The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that 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.

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 will be useful if witnesses use the words, "I will take that as a question taken on notice," or words to that effect. This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

In the first session this morning we will hear from the ACT Council of Social Service. We welcome Dr Gemma Killen. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege, and I draw your attention to the privilege statement that is in front of you. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Dr Killen: I understand.

THE CHAIR: Do you have an opening statement that you would like to make?

Dr Killen: Just a brief one. I want to thank the committee for inviting us to appear today, and I note that there were a number of positive measures in the budget. I especially want to note the increase in the indexation rate for the community sector. That is something that we really appreciate. It is not everything that we wanted, obviously, but it was the outcome of a really productive working relationship between the sector and the ACT government.

There are still a number of recommendations from the *Counting the costs* report that we released earlier this year that we would like to see implemented. But this was a really positive step towards making sure that the community sector is best able to support the people that are doing it tough in Canberra and that are struggling with rising costs of living. That is all that I want to say before we start. I am happy to take questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Dr Killen.

MR PARTON: I would like to open the discussion by touching on the ACT housing growth and renewal program. ACTCOSS have been rather robust critics of some aspects of the rollout of that program—the way that the government has handled this, with over 300 letters being delivered without notice to tenants, telling them to relocate.

Since ACTCOSS began advocating for and being a part of the public voice in that narrative, have you seen a change in the handling of the program?

Dr Killen: We saw a really positive thing happen, in that the exemption process was reviewed, and a panel was established for people to apply for exemptions. We see that as really positive. We know that a number of people have secured exemptions through that process, particularly some really vulnerable people that we were working with. That is a really positive step.

As we have said publicly many times, we want it to be an opt-in program, and we have not seen that happen. But we think that the government has been listening more closely to our concerns since we have started raising them and has taken them a bit more seriously. There is extra funding in this budget for the growing and renewal program, which we also see as being very positive; so there have been some positive changes.

MR PARTON: Given that there is some extra funding for the growth and renewal program, will that mean that we do see a similar process rolled out by government? If that is the case, although that process could be similar, what changes would you like to see made to it? How would you like to see them deal with this situation in the future?

Dr Killen: As we have said, we want it to be an opt-in program. That is the ideal. A lot of the issues that have arisen in the growing and renewal program have been issues with communication—particularly, with Housing ACT and tenants—and a lack of real empathy and relationship building with those tenants.

It is about making sure that the process is very slow, very well communicated, communicated in person, rather than via letters, and that people have adequate legal and advocacy support if they decide to go through an exemption process, so that they are not doing it by themselves.

MR PARTON: You have indicated that, in a perfect world, you would like to see a genuine opt-in scenario here. Although there has been a process by which people can seek exemption, and some people have gained that, it is pretty clear, certainly based on feedback that I am sure you have had, and even feedback that we see publicly, that some people have not managed to gain that exemption. The way that they are characterising the situation is that they will be forced from their homes. Does ACTCOSS see this as an acceptable situation?

Dr Killen: Obviously, we do not see it as an acceptable situation to have people forced from their homes. The cases that we have seen, where people have not been able to secure an exemption, are particularly where people have an existing relationship with Housing ACT that is not so great. I have spoken to some people on the phone who are not willing to share details of their story, not only with Housing ACT but also with community organisations that might help them through the exemption process. Some people are attempting to go through the exemption process on their own, without legal support. We have seen that those cases are less likely to secure exemptions.

MR PARTON: You say without legal support. We know, because I have had discussions with your organisation and with Canberra Community Law, that getting access to that legal support is nigh on impossible, given the numbers involved.

Dr Killen: Yes. Canberra Community Law are doing a lot of work above and beyond what they have capacity for, to try and support people in these situations. But some people do not want that legal support, and some people are having trouble accessing it—again because Canberra Community Law are working above their capacity.

MR BRADDOCK: You mentioned, in both your pre-budget and post-budget submission, dedicated funding for an independent advocacy voice for culturally and linguistically diverse Canberrans in the ACT. Can you please describe what ACTCOSS sees as the gap or the need for this particular voice?

Dr Killen: We see independent advocacy organisations and independent peak bodies for people of migrant and refugee background in all other states and territories, but not in the ACT. That limits the ability for migrant and refugee communities in Canberra to advocate on behalf of the people that they represent in a truly independent way. It also limits their ability to connect with organisations in other states. We know that FECCA represents all of those peak bodies in other states and territories, and the ACT has limited participation because we do not have one of those peak bodies.

MR BRADDOCK: What would be the advantages if such a body existed here in the ACT?

Dr Killen: There would be increased capacity for consultation, for example. Reflecting on the recent inquiry into racial discrimination, for example, I know that there were communities in the ACT that struggled to respond to that inquiry because there is so little capacity. We know that the Multicultural Community Forum do a lot of that work, but they are not funded to do it, so they struggle to engage properly, and they struggle to do other community activities that they want to engage in.

Again, reflecting on other inquiries, we are working at the moment on the inquiry into abortion and reproductive choice, and Canberra Multicultural Community Forum were talking to us about the need to have information about abortion access in a range of different languages across health services. They would like to assist with making that happen but, again, they do not have that capacity, because they are not funded to do things like that.

DR PATERSON: My question is in respect of your budget overview. It says that what is missing is any targeted funding for supports for older Canberrans. I am interested in what ACTCOSS sees as the gaps there. What is most urgent, or where should most priority funding go, in terms of supporting older Canberrans?

Dr Killen: ADACAS and AFI will have more to say on this issue. We know that a report was tabled earlier this year—I do not think we have seen it—on older people’s mental health in the ACT. We see that there should be dedicated funding to respond to that report and the recommendations made in that report.

Older people in Canberra are particularly at risk from COVID. We need to ensure that there are particular supports around managing COVID risks for older people so that they are not left to self-isolate or self-manage the risks on their own, and that there is adequate access to medications, vaccinations and all of those kinds of things.

DR PATERSON: Are there any current programs or services that you think should be funded or given increased funding as a matter of priority?

Dr Killen: That is a great question. I note that ADACAS do a lot of work in this space, and they would like to be able to do more and to participate more. Potentially, that would be a good place not only to direct the question but also to direct extra funding.

MR PARTON: In your budget reply you welcomed many aspects of the budget. You welcomed the budget for housing, health and the community sector, but you did say that more is needed. How far do you feel that the \$57 million for maintenance will go? I know, as the shadow minister, how much communication you guys would be getting about maintenance issues, and I would like to hear ACTCOSS's view on that particular issue.

Dr Killen: If it is managed well, it can go for a long distance.

MR PARTON: Do you think that it is being managed well?

Dr Killen: It is a good question. Our main concerns, again, are about communication between Housing ACT and tenants, and the management of significant maintenance issues. We have heard stories of people being moved out of their properties during significant maintenance works and having trouble moving back in or not having sufficient support to be away from their homes for a significant period of time. Again, it will be about communication with tenants and making sure that people have the adequate support that they need to leave their house while maintenance is happening.

MR PARTON: The Labor minister in this space is always talking about growing the stock, but I know that Dr Campbell, from your organisation, has publicly expressed some scepticism about how quickly we are moving forward in that space. What is ACTCOSS's view in regard to the \$30 million for additional public housing? What is ACTCOSS's view on how that will go with the current market? Is that funding enough to secure the 400 additional homes that have been promised?

Dr Killen: Perhaps I will take that question on notice and let Dr Campbell write a response.

MR PARTON: Yes; that is fine. Finally, in that housing space, how do you feel about the announcement to support CHPs to participate in build-to-rent? What impact do you think that will have on the current rental and social housing crisis?

Dr Killen: We are supportive of CHPs participating in build-to-rent. What is in the budget is money to investigate how that might happen, rather than funding directly to CHPs to operate build-to-rent properties. Again, it will depend on how it plays out. We want to make sure that CHPs are part of the consultation, and that we are part of the consultation to see what share of funding they end up with.

MR PARTON: Is it moving fast enough? Given the crisis that we have now, is it moving fast enough?

Dr Killen: I do not think so. We are facing a significant housing crisis. We are talking about people on waiting lists for four-plus years. I am not sure how much worse it could get, so it is urgent that we move quickly.

THE CHAIR: In your budget submission you recommended resourcing the Justice Reinvestment Strategy. What capacity does ACTCOSS have to assist with resourcing the Justice Reinvestment Strategy? For instance, does ACTCOSS know of any programs or organisations wishing to have more to do with AMC who cannot do so because of a shortfall in funding or difficulty in accessing the prison?

Dr Killen: Yes, we know of many organisations. We run the Justice Reform Group on a bimonthly basis. It is a group comprising community members and a lot of organisations that work in the justice space. Recently, Commissioner Johnson has been joining those meetings, which has been really helpful. He has been able to hear directly from the community and organisations.

There are organisations such as Women's Centre for Health Matters; they have been running a health promotion service for women detainees in the AMC. They have been doing that unfunded for a number of years. Care Financial runs financial literacy programs in the AMC, also unfunded. A number of other organisations would like to participate more in providing services and programs in the AMC, but capacity is low and they are not funded to do so.

MR BRADDOCK: I am interested in ACTCOSS's advocacy for free public transport, particularly given that we have in place the concession scheme, off-peak travel and so forth. Is it ACTCOSS's view that government funds should be directed at providing free public transport even for those who could afford it, or is it maybe a case of investing more in the network and the infrastructure to have a more frequent, reliable service? What is your view?

Dr Killen: I do not think that the two things are necessarily at odds. We would like a trial of free public transport so that we can properly analyse the costs and benefits. We might be able to weigh up that question a bit better if we actually know what it would contribute. It is a bit tricky to means test things like transport, so it would be good to have a trial, at least, of free public transport. We imagine that this could be similar to how they operate in Melbourne, with free public transport within the city limits; we could trial something similar.

DR PATERSON: With respect to measures requiring further consideration, you have highlighted the community sector involvement in a significant refresh of the ACT infrastructure plan; also, what is missing is a review of ageing community facilities and community organisation facilities. What is ACTCOSS's view of what is needed to refresh, and the extent that community facilities need to be refreshed?

Dr Killen: In terms of community facilities, we have two goals in that space. One is about ensuring that new suburbs, or even older suburbs like Gungahlin, have sufficient community space for people to gather, have meetings and do things that communities need to do together.

Also, many of the ACT Property Group buildings that the community sector is

operating out of have significant damage or are not fit for purpose. We would like to see those fixed. We are talking about holes in the ceiling or inaccessible doorways—things like that. We have been working with the sector on cataloguing some of those issues that we have shared with ACT Property Group. I know that a review has been happening, particularly in Belconnen, I think. We would like to see the results of that review, when they are ready, so that we can best inform what happens next in terms of community facilities.

DR PATERSON: As you said, they seem to be focusing on Belconnen. Are there any other areas or particular buildings that you think urgently require attention?

Dr Killen: I think it is across the board rather than any building in particular.

MR PARTON: You touched earlier on public transport and the prospect of free public transport. I want to expand on that and ask about the disadvantage of distance. Even in a city of our size, which is not great in population, there is a great distance to travel for a lot of people. We know that when a number of public housing tenants were moved from the inner north, they found themselves out in some far-flung suburban areas. They felt that it was difficult to access services and they felt disadvantaged by distance.

Do you think that the government, and I guess the budget, pay enough heed to that disadvantage of distance? Certainly, being a Tuggeranong member, I am often speaking to people in the Lanyon Valley who feel that, because of that distance and that lack of transport, they are not able to easily access the services that fall under your umbrella.

Dr Killen: I think that it is a real issue. We particularly like to talk about the last kilometre of a journey. People might be on a public transport network but they live quite far from the closest bus stop. That throws up issues around accessibility for people who might have accessibility issues with walking or travelling for lengthy distances. There are also safety issues, particularly for women and for people with a migrant background. It creates a situation where those that are most disadvantaged become more disadvantaged because they are disconnected, as you say, not only from community organisations but from the community.

MR PARTON: How much focus should there be on improving the transport connections for those people or how much focus should there be on actually providing social services closer to them? That is the question that I have.

Dr Killen: We would like to see both things happen. Some organisations do not have the capacity to operate multiple sites. For example, CAHMA, the peer support service for drug users, only have one site, in Belconnen, but there would obviously be people in Tuggeranong who need to access that service. They do not necessarily have the capacity—although I think they would like to—to have more sites. We need to see not only increased public transport but also more access to the kinds of services that we recommend.

THE CHAIR: ACTCOSS recommended ongoing funding in this budget for domestic and family violence, as well as a sexual assault response, beyond the COVID-19 funding of 2021-22. Can you give us a bit more background on the circumstances that your organisation has been involved with or a witness to which have led to identifying the need for ongoing funding in this area?

Dr Killen: Yes. We do not provide services, so we are not directly in contact with clients. We do hear from DVCS, CRCC and other organisations that support people who are going through family or sexual violence that this increased—and we saw this across Australia—significantly during COVID, and that it has a long tail, so that people are continuing to experience those kinds of stresses.

We also know that, as things like cost of living go up, family violence incidents also go up, as people experience stress. We know that this is still happening and that services are struggling to meet the demand that they are seeing at the moment.

THE CHAIR: To your knowledge has the number of domestic violence incidents increased, particularly over the last couple of years, due to isolation and lockdowns? Has there been a significant increase? Do extra support and funding need to be provided for that potential increase?

Dr Killen: I do not know about it being due to lockdowns, specifically, rather than the pandemic as a whole. I think we saw some positive changes happen, but during lockdown there were some problems with making sure that people could still leave violent situations and that people could access the police in a safe and sensitive way. We heard one story of someone reporting a family violence incident to police and they refused to come into her house because it was during lockdown. She had to stand in the street in the evening and tell her story. We spoke to ACT Policing after that situation and made sure that those sorts of things were not happening again. Those kinds of things were happening, and that added stress for the people who were experiencing family violence.

THE CHAIR: By way of a comment, it would have been difficult for people who have been experiencing that—being isolated in the house where this was occurring. It would have been stressful for them. Do you think that could potentially have a long-term impact on those people—not being able to seek support? Could it have enlarged the issue?

Dr Killen: Yes. We also saw during COVID and during lockdown that people were reporting incidents of family violence for the first time. For people that had not experienced it before, there was an increase in first-time complainants. That was a real issue.

The other issue about lockdown was that many people who are leaving family violence will want to go interstate or to family overseas, and they were not able to do that. Because of the housing crisis as well, there were not necessarily places for them to flee to. So staying in a situation of family violence will obviously cause added stress.

MR BRADDOCK: Amongst the list in your submission you say that there should be a review of the targeted assistance strategy to ensure that concessions are addressing need. From ACTCOSS's perspective do you have evidence of where those concessions are not effectively addressing need?

Dr Killen: Our concern is that we do not know whether they are addressing need. We put that suggestion into last year's budget submission as well, because we were

concerned about the government continuing to fund the targeted assistance strategy in the same way, without doing a substantive review to make sure that it was meeting need. As we understand it, that review is happening currently, so we are keen to see what comes out of that review and whether any changes will be made in terms of funding.

MR BRADDOCK: You do not have any anecdotal evidence? It is just a case of it having been a while and a review would be necessary?

Dr Killen: Yes. We know that, during COVID, when social security payments were higher, people experienced less stress and less poverty. People could access health services more—things like that. We know that people are struggling to meet electricity bills, and we are working with energy companies to make sure that those voices are captured, but we do not know anything specific about the targeted assistance strategy.

DR PATERSON: Could you speak in the last couple of minutes about why ACTCOSS thinks it is important that the ACT has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled housing provider?

Dr Killen: Yes. We used to have one of those and now we do not. We would like to see it happen again. We know that lots of people in the Aboriginal community have less than positive relationships with Housing ACT, and potentially other housing avenues are not as culturally safe. It comes back to the fact that we would like to see most Aboriginal services provided by Aboriginal community controlled organisations so that communities can make decisions that work out best for them.

DR PATERSON: I can look this up myself, but do you know long ago it was when the ACT did have a—

Dr Killen: Not off the top of my head, no.

DR PATERSON: I will do some googling; thank you.

THE CHAIR: There being no further questions, we will draw this session to a close. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank Dr Gemma Killen for attending today. As I understand it there was one question taken on notice. Could I please ask you to provide an answer to the committee secretary within five working days from now? Once again thank you for attending today's session.

Dr Killen: Thank you for having me.

Hearing suspended from 10.29 to 10.39 am.

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

THE CHAIR: In this session we welcome Mr Graham Catt from the Canberra Business Chamber. We have Graham via telephone for today's hearing. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. I hope that that statement has been sent to you.

Mr Catt: Yes, it has, thanks, Chair, and I have read it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Before we go to questions, is there an opening statement that you would like to make?

Mr Catt: Yes. Under the circumstances, I will make it very brief. It goes the context of the comments that I might make to the committee and other public reporting of our response to the budget. I am trying to really frame those in terms of the importance of the business sector and, when I refer to things like support and assistance, what I mean by that.

It is important to recognise that at the moment we have about 31,499 actively GST tax-remitting businesses operating in the territory and we have enjoyed very fast rates of growth. I think it is important to note two things. One is that, at the last count, when we think about employment in the ACT, 63 to 64 per cent of our jobs are now in the private sector—not to take away from the importance of the federal government in the ACT, as part of the territory, but certainly people are working within business and working within the private sector.

The other thing is that when we talk about businesses in the public discourse, it is very important to note that, of those businesses, the vast majority are small businesses—and they are employing one to 19 people—or microbusinesses, where it is a sole trader or a family with no employees at all. I say that because I think that when we talk about business we often do so in the abstract. We often talk about the entity, but in Canberra we really do have a business community where, in the main, we are talking small business operators; we are talking about people who work in the business and are effectively working themselves. I think it is a very important thing to understand when we talk about business.

The context of that, as well, is that when I talk about things like support for business or assistance for business—and I note in the Canberra Switched On economic statements, in the budget statements, we are looking for 5,000 more businesses to come to Canberra—I really talk about supports or assistance not in the context of a handout from government but very much in the context of investment that will help businesses grow, that will help businesses survive, that will turn small businesses into bigger businesses and generally enable them to keep making their contribution to our revenues, to the territory, to our population growth and of course to jobs growth, which is very, very important as well.

The second thing I wanted to speak about goes to context as well and, I think, to the budget particularly, and that is very much where our businesses are at the moment in terms of the trade environment. It says a lot about the last 2½ years, during the pandemic.

We find ourselves in 2022 with a range of businesses that have been affected in a range of ways over the past 2½ years or so. Some businesses have actually prospered over that time; other sectors and businesses have really struggled throughout 2020 and 2021. Where we find ourselves now—and keeping in mind that these are small businesses or microbusinesses in the main—is with the skills shortages that people are grappling with, and the inability to find staff has been well documented. For a lot of businesses, that coincides with the challenge of, on a daily basis, absenteeism, which we are hearing about in other sectors of the community, including schools and hospitals and our health system.

So, again, we have moved from a situation where the preoccupation of business has really been with demand issues and with public health restrictions to challenges around supply—the inability to find the staff to meet demand and the inability to find supplies. Businesses are impacted by rising costs. Again, in consideration of the cost of living increasing, the cost of doing business, and particularly for a small business, is increasing dramatically as well. We are also hearing increasingly about businesses that cannot find the supplies they need or that the cost of those supplies has risen by often very staggering amounts—hundreds and hundreds of per cent over a short period of time.

I think all of that goes to the context of my remarks—being that businesses still do need support, but that, again, is not in the form of handouts for survival. That support is very much in the context of, in the current operating environments, how do we help our businesses and how do we help our private sector continue to grow, to adapt and position them so that they can make the kinds of contributions to our economy that we need them to, so that we can realise some of the objectives that the government has framed?

Thanks, Chair. I will leave it there. I am happy to hear from the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Catt, for your opening statement. I will pass my substantive question across to Ms Castley.

MS CASTLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Catt, for your pre-budget submission and your attendance today. You touched on this a little: the importance of the business sector to the ACT economy, so I am interested in understanding a little bit more about that—how big and important you believe that is to the ACT economy. And, in light of that, how adequately supported would you say the business community is in the current budget?

Mr Catt: Thank you. I think that goes to my opening remarks and providing some of that context. To the first part of the question, we know that it is going to be the private sector, largely, that is going to be instrumental in driving the growth of the territory. We know that, when it comes to jobs creation and when it comes to the generation of gross state product, or gross territory product, in this case, it is very much going to be coming from the territory. When we look at the figures, we can see that, although public administration is still a very, very key part of our economy, actually the highest growth area in the ACT is in professional and scientific services. So we know that these contributions are growing and it is going to be absolutely critical.

In terms of support—and I go back to my opening comments—I think we need more support, but that support is really in the form of handouts to enable people to survive.

It is support that enables people to adapt; support that provides the ability for a whole range of businesses. I do recognise the support that is provided through the Canberra Innovation Network and other programs for innovation. But I think when we are talking about growing our business sectors, when we are talking about some of the growth sectors—renewables is one of them, and we talk about growing the cyber sector and space—these are all areas where there is competition from other states and territories and competition globally to grow the same industry. So I think we need to see real investment and more substantial investment in how we are actually going to grow these sectors and how we are going to compete in a highly competitive environment.

The example we often think about is South Australia, who are spending hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars in actually building an environment for the space industry and to attract people that work in those areas, including cyber. In tourism we see Queensland, for example, spending hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars on workforce attraction to that particular sector. In Western Australia there is workforce attraction to get people to work in the resources industry. I think, with those sorts of investments, there is definitely still a lot of scope for the territory to invest more to actually support the growth of those industries, going forward.

MS CASTLEY: On that, you talked about businesses needing support. Is their engagement with government sufficient? How is the engagement with government going for small businesses—those family run businesses—in Canberra? Do you think they have the ability to talk to government?

Mr Catt: I would say that one of the key issues that we found in talking to businesses—this has been picked up in the Better Regulation reports, and I know that the Better Regulation Taskforce reported on that same issue—is that often it is not the regulation itself that is the issue. Again, I say it in the context that compliance is a cost for business and unnecessary compliance is a cost that we should be doing everything we can to take away. But often the feedback that we got from businesses, and particularly small businesses, was that it was more the interactions with the regulators and the interactions with government, rather than the regulation itself, that were problematic.

This is a certainly something that we put in our pre-budget submission. My understanding is that there was funding for all of the work of the Better Regulation Taskforce in the previous budget. But we would like to have seen in this budget as well some recognition that addressing some of those issues is cultural, for lack of a better word. It is about how do we help government understand what business is all about, what operating a business involves, and making those interactions smoother and less time-consuming. I think that would be of benefit. We would like to have seen some more recognition of that in this budget as well.

MS CASTLEY: Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: My question goes to your pre-budget submission, where you say that the cost of housing is a significant barrier to attracting workers from other jurisdictions. Are you able to give me some sort of quantitative evidence or greater clarity of the picture and what the size and the scope of the issue is there?

Mr Catt: Yes. Thank you. Look, the short answer is no. I do not think anyone has really

gathered the quantitative evidence about how we measure this impact, because ultimately it comes to the attractiveness, for someone, of moving to the territory.

Work is currently being undertaken by the University of Canberra, which has been funded to look at workforce attraction in the ACT, and I have no doubt that a lot of that feedback will go to the cost of housing as a potential deterrent or potential decision-maker. I am hoping that that research will actually provide some more quantitative data that we can all use to look at.

But from an anecdotal point of view there is no doubt that conversations in the business community that begin with what is happening in the trading environment very rapidly move to the challenges of skills and workforce, of attracting and keeping people. And when that conversation moves to: “What are the factors that impact that?” it is the inability to find housing. You can attract someone to a job, you can show them a job in the ACT, but when people come to the reality of finding housing in order to be able to move here—or pricing housing to understand the net return of that job—that is often something that causes someone not to make that decision.

MR BRADDOCK: House prices across the whole of Australia have gone up. For example, Sydney is still far more expensive than Canberra, but you are still seeing that evidence of people not willing to shift from wherever they may be coming from, to Canberra, because of the uneconomic viability of it?

Mr Catt: Yes, we are. I think it is probably quite different sectors of the economy. I think when we are talking about someone moving to Canberra to take up a special services role with a good salary packet, house prices are comparative and probably slightly lower than they are in Sydney and Melbourne.

In the context, thinking about this as a competitive environment, a good point of comparison would be South Australia, where, again, they have many of the same lifestyle things that we are promoting as benefits of moving to Canberra. Increasingly, they have many of the same career opportunities, particularly given the investment in some of those emerging sectors, but the housing crisis there is somewhat lower.

I think the other change that we have, though, is that not everybody is moving to Canberra to take up those sorts of roles. When we think about people working in construction, it is the workforce that we need, and those people are not necessarily on high incomes, and that is what we are hearing from a whole range of stakeholders about the challenges of finding housing here. So we know that we have very high aggregate income in the territory, but for someone who is earning the average wage I think the cost of housing is very, very, challenging.

The other thing we are hearing more and more is that it is not just the cost; it is the availability. For someone relocating to Canberra—that may be from a regional centre; not everybody relocates here from a capital city—it is not just the cost of finding housing. The availability of rental accommodation, for example, is very, very, difficult. So that makes that transition hard. For families, particularly, it is about accommodating the family, moving the whole family to a city, that can be a challenge.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

DR PATERSON: Mr Catt, I was just wondering if you could speak a little more to the Canberra region and business engagement in the region and, I guess, transition from regional New South Wales to the ACT?

Mr Catt: Yes. I am happy to. Can you give me a little bit more context?

DR PATERSON: Do business owners come from New South Wales to the ACT? Is the ACT seen as an attractive place to set up business in the Canberra region?

Mr Catt: Okay; thank you. I think it depends very much on the business that you are in. Clearly, if you are providing a service—as an example, if you are running a heating and cooling place where you basically operate an office and from that office people go out into the territory—more and more I think people are setting up their base outside of the ACT. Some of the incentives are better and some of the costs of operating that business are less in New South Wales. Obviously, when you are pretty much over the border and within 10 minutes drive of the ACT and your customers, taking advantage of that makes good business sense. For other businesses, the proximity to universities, the proximity to defence, the proximity to the APS in different sectors, means that actually establishing a business or just having a business development presence is an attractive proposition. So it really depends very much on what business people are in.

One of the challenges is that, when we think about how we adapt and how we create opportunities for new businesses, that decision can be, again, based on a whole range of factors. So we do see people transfer, but it depends very much on the nature of the business. There are definitely businesses where it makes more economic sense to actually locate to premises outside of the ACT borders but still very much be able to trade inside the ACT and, in fact, have the bulk of your customers inside the ACT.

DR PATERSON: You said that the majority of our businesses in the ACT are small or microbusinesses and that you are calling on the government to invest in and support these businesses. And you mentioned industries that we should be competitive in and should be investing in. Is it an either/or? Is it that the government should be investing in particular industry and that will stimulate small business growth or do you see that we need to be doing both at the same time?

Mr Catt: I think we need to be doing both at the same time, in short. If we look at the budget itself, there was around \$22 million announced which really aligned with some of the key capability areas that are set out in the Switched On Canberra statements. It is very difficult to see from the budget papers how that \$22 million will be used to actually assist the growth, to invest in the growth in those particular areas. Again, I would say that, compared to other jurisdictions and compared to other investments globally, that is a relatively small amount of investment. So how do we get bang for that buck and how do we support those kinds of emerging industries to succeed and to succeed in a competitive environment?

I guess the best way to look at that is that, as we grow those businesses, along with the public sector, we are creating markets for a whole range of service industries that are there to actually serve those people. They are our hospitality operators and our accommodation providers, as we hopefully see business travel as well as leisure travel

pick back up. There are a different range of supports that are needed for some of those sectors as well.

The third part of that is that we clearly have a really good entrepreneurial base here in Canberra. We have incredibly high rates of business formation. We have highlighted the high rates of business growth that we see in the ACT. I think the other opportunity is to say, “How do we take that entrepreneurial spirit,” for lack of a better word, and, “How do we support people who may be in business already to adapt their operations and enter a different kind of industry or use the assets that they already have and move into something else or produce different types of goods and services?”

There is opportunity for more investment. Again, I would call that business support. It is supporting entrepreneurs to be adaptive and innovative and to change their operations to realise new opportunities. That is what is going to drive growth. That goes, again, to my opening statement. I think that when we talk about support we need to be very careful to understand that support is not necessarily about handouts. Support is often really about investment so that people can grow and prosper and deliver economic benefit.

DR PATERSON: Thank you. Is there one particular support that stands out that you think we absolutely should be investing in that we are not?

Mr Catt: I think the stand-out now, if you asked any business operator, has to be in the skills area, because, again, any conversation now about business challenge turns to skill. Tangible investment that people can see is probably the most significant thing right now, in August 2022.

DR PATERSON: Fantastic .Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Thank you, Mr Graham Catt. I would like to thank you, on behalf of the committee, for your attendance today. As I understand it, there were no questions taken on notice. However, if I am misguided on that, you do have five days to provide answers back to the committee. We now draw this session to a close. Once again, thank you very much for attending. The committee will now suspend for a break and reconvene again at 1 pm.

Mr Catt: Thank you very much, Chair. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk to you today.

Hearing suspended from 11.01 am to 1.01 pm.

PURI, MS NISHI, President, Multicultural Association of Canberra
AMAR, MR KRANTI, Treasurer, Multicultural Association of Canberra

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to this Select Committee on Estimates hearing. Witnesses, 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 could use these words, as best as you possibly can remember: "I will take that as a question taken on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

In this session we will hear from the Multicultural Association of Canberra. Welcome, and thank you for appearing. I remind you about the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can I confirm, for the record, that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Ms Puri: Yes, that we cannot be sued or charged. Isn't that good!

THE CHAIR: Okay. We have a 20-minute slot for you. You are welcome to make an opening statement before we go to questions.

Ms Puri: Okay. I will begin by introducing us and what we do. I am the President of the Multicultural Association of Canberra and also the President of GOPIO, which is the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin. I have just been appointed as honorary ACT Multicultural Ambassador. Our associations work really very hard to deliver good sessions and social events, looking after seniors, looking after migrants, and promoting diversity and multiculturalism in Canberra.

We recently did a survey on the budget and also on the multicultural bill and we have put out what we thought were the pros and what we thought were the cons of the budget. If that is what you are going to ask today, we do have some evidence that we have collected and we are happy to produce that for you. My team members Shashi, who was a volunteer at MAC, and Mr Kranti Amar, who is the Treasurer of MAC, will be supporting this meeting as well. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your opening statement.

MR CAIN: I have a question about your understanding of the status of the promised multicultural centre in Gungahlin. What is your understanding of where that project is up to?

Ms Puri: To our understanding, that project is up to nowhere, really, because there is no mention of the multicultural hall in our budget. It was promised in the 2020 election that there would be a multicultural hall in Gungahlin for the growing diverse community, as we are finding it really, really hard to host our functions. I have got evidence and examples of that, as to how hard not having a multicultural venue is.

If you would like, I can give you an example.

MR CAIN: Please.

Ms Puri: My daughter's wedding reception was going to happen on 24 April this year and we had booked Old Parliament House. So we used to go there, we were talking to the chef, we did everything and they promised to deliver a meal that was Indian, which we wanted, that would cater to our people who were coming for the function. Ten days before the function, we got a call saying that this was not going to happen and the only food that they could provide was Western. So either you host the event using the Western part of it or cancel it or go wherever you want to go. We were in such a dilemma. We felt we were really let down.

We tried every other option. We tried the Abbey in Nicholls. They do the same thing. They only provide Western food. They do not let you call for caterers or anyone from outside. And then you are stuck for ideas. Then we ended up going to the Hyatt, which is very multicultural and inclusive, we found, and they were able to cater for our needs. So we definitely require a multicultural hall where we can host our weddings, our receptions, our ceremonies, our festivals. The way we want to cook and the way we want to celebrate should be reflected in that multicultural hall, where we can go and have a sense of belonging, which we did not feel we had at Old Parliament House or at the Abbey when we went looking for venues.

MR CAIN: The concerns that you have just expressed, have you brought those to the attention of the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and, if so, what responses are you getting?

Ms Puri: We rang up various lawyers because we ended up paying more at the Hyatt, and they told us to lodge that at ACAT. My daughter is looking into it and we have put in a submission to ACAT asking how we should go about doing that. We consulted Nicole, because I am quite close to Nicole. I sent her a text and Nicole said that it is not a part of the ACT government and maybe they cannot do anything about it. But we have taken this matter to ACAT because letting us down at the last minute was not okay.

MR CAIN: And the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, have you had a discussion with her?

Ms Puri: I did not take it to Ms Cheyne, no.

Mr Amar: Can we add something to that?

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Mr Amar: It is not just one multicultural hall we are needing. We need small community rooms in southside, northside, in Denman Prospect, and in all the four directions. Why do we need it? So that, when you have a significant number of people, we can have our get-togethers, so that we do not have to pay a rent, so that tomorrow when we retire we can share our food in that community hall with you. So, this is the kind of thing which we need in all directions, not just in Gungahlin; it has to be in the south and maybe one near the city, so that accommodation we can get rent free. That is

what we need.

Ms Puri: Another option to the multicultural hall—while it is being made; in the interim—even if we have those areas, those avenues of meeting, would be a great idea.

MR CAIN: But how do your members feel about something that was promised in a budget but does not seem to be happening?

Ms Puri: Not delivered? They feel let down. They do feel let down, because that was a very big part of the election promise and that is the reason people were really excited about the multicultural hall and they felt really badly let down.

MR CAIN: Sorry to hear.

THE CHAIR: Mr Braddock, do you have a substantive question?

MR BRADDOCK: There was something that was not mentioned in your submission, but I wanted to raise with you. You have campaigned in the past for ethnic-appropriate aged care.

Ms Puri: Yes.

MR BRADDOCK: How could the ACT government help you in achieving that goal for your community?

Ms Puri: We have sent letters to the ministers. We have been to various MLAs. They say that it is not within their jurisdiction. I have even spoken to Marisa about it; I have spoken to you, I think, about that as well. I am not sure that Peter knows about it. I have spoken to all the MLAs. We have sent emails to Tara Cheyne and to David Pocock. The response we got from Ms Cheyne's office was that aged care does not come under the ACT government so we have to send it to the federal government. I have written an email to the Hon. Mark Butler, and I am awaiting a response from him to see how we can make our nursing homes more inclusive, more diverse and more culturally sensitive. In the interim, the existing nursing homes could have a way which is multicultural. It would extremely help the ageing population, because I do understand that it will take a while before the new building can come up, in terms of housing the multicultural community there.

And I am not talking about Indians; I am talking about the entire multicultural community that exists in Canberra. We want a facility for them, but in the interim, while that is being processed, we want something in the existing nursing homes to cater for their needs, because none of the nursing homes cater for any meals that are, for example, Indian. There is nothing Indian on the menu. The staff are diverse; there could be someone from Africa or someone from Spain, but they would not be able to speak that person's language.

And they do not want to come here; they want to go to Sydney, for example, because in Sydney there are a lot of multicultural nursing homes. Some aged-care people who we know—our friends' parents—have migrated to Sydney just to be in those nursing homes. Why shouldn't we have this facility in Canberra—the most diverse and

multicultural community? We need to have the facility here.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms Puri: No problem.

DR PATERSON: When we last spoke, you were going to speak to one of the nursing homes, the aged-care facilities, that are about to start development in Molonglo. Did you end up communicating with them?

Ms Puri: There is no communication link. When I rang up your office, I spoke to Rhys, and Rhys said to me, 'You have to just rock up over there. There are no appointments that you can make. So, if you go to Denman Prospect, to their community centre, you can just join and listen to everything,' which we intend to do.

DR PATERSON: Okay, but maybe just call the company—the aged-care provider.

Ms Puri: I did not have the name of the aged-care provider, so you will have to send me the name of the aged-care provider.

DR PATERSON: Okay.

Ms Puri: That would be very helpful. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Just following up on the hall matter, does the community use the Weston Creek community hall and the Belconnen community hall? Does that meet requirements of the community?

Ms Puri: Do you mean the Weston Creek Community Centre?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Puri: Does it meet the requirements of the multicultural community?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Puri: Yes, they do at times, but during COVID-19 times and now, I think they put a restriction of only 100 people in the hall. It is not a big enough hall for us to host a big event. Our functions start with at least 250 people at a time, so how are we going to do all those functions and weddings in a smaller space? We want a space that is really big to host a large number of people, not just a tiny little hall. Of course they are good halls, and we want a stage and everything there, but we want it bigger in size.

THE CHAIR: Are there any halls in the ACT at the moment that actually meet the needs from the community, that it could be modelled from?

Ms Puri: I am talking about the Bicentennial Hall in Queanbeyan. We need something of that size, which is not here in Canberra. Unless we go to the Hyatt or somewhere to host a function, there is nothing big available in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: But then, obviously, with the Hyatt, there is going to be a lot more cost.

Ms Puri: Much more. My goodness, it is like paying a house deposit! For my daughter's wedding, I know it will cost a lot of money.

DR PATERSON: I am wondering if you could talk more about your role as the multicultural ambassador and what that—

Ms Puri: What that involves?

DR PATERSON: Yes.

Ms Puri: I have not yet formally met Mr Smyth, who is our international engagement commissioner. He has given us a date, 23 August, to have a meeting just behind the Assembly. He will be explaining to us what the role would involve, but, to my understanding, one thing would be to promote multiculturalism and to welcome the students and other international people that come to Canberra, and talk about how we can build ties.

For example, I am from India; what can I do to make our trade ties, or, in terms of education, how can we make our relationships better? How can we attract more tourism and more international students to come to Canberra, to raise the benchmark of Canberra, and invite those people to come and study or visit Canberra in particular? That will be one of the main parts of that role—to liaise between the two governments. It depends on what the government here would throw as an extra to the government over there. Suppose they say, 'If you come to Canberra, we will give you two extra points for coming to Canberra,'—I am just giving an example—that would make a lot of difference.

DR PATERSON: Fantastic.

MR CAIN: Regarding the multicultural recognition bill, there is a proposal—it is a consultation draft at the moment—to put in legislation the establishment of a multicultural advisory council.

Ms Puri: Yes.

MR CAIN: Obviously, we already have a multicultural advisory council but the idea is to put it in legislation so it is something that is required of the government, rather than the minister just setting up a council. Can you think of any other things that would benefit the multicultural community within such a piece of legislation—other things that you would like to see enshrined in law to encourage and uplift your community?

Ms Puri: Something that would be beneficial for our multicultural community? I said to Andrew earlier about equal opportunities in the Public Service in Canberra. It is very necessary that people are treated with respect. Another thing that I was noticing for the international students, because I run my own business, is one big issue that is cropping up. Although it is not part of the budget, I wish somebody would think about it.

When these international students or people on a skill visa come to Australia—I know a few families who would be happy to be interviewed and want to come forward as well—they leave their children behind, simply because of the schools and the childcare fees. They do not get anything for the schools and the childcare, and the government schools charge them a lot of money. This is absolutely unaffordable for them.

With COVID and international borders being closed, I have childcare workers who have not seen their children for the last four years. When they come here for three or four months they just sit idle. They miss out on their schooling, and they have nowhere to go while their parents are working. For them the schools are not accessible because the schools charge a whopping fee.

I would strongly recommend to the government: I know that nothing can be done for the international students and the non-migrants, but they should at least consider doing something for the children, because every child has a right to education, as we see in the United Nations' rights of children. Every child has a right to education, so why do the parents of international students just earn to keep the children in school and have nothing else? They should be given some subsidy to make it affordable. I really want this to go in the bill for them—to make Canberra an inclusive city. They are going to be our future citizens down the track, so it would be a good experience for them when they come to Canberra. 'Hey, we've got something here for our child. Our child can go to school like a normal child,' like my child went. I hardly paid anything in the government schools for them—just for books or whatever—and that should be the way for every child that comes here. Education should not be denied. I would really strongly advocate for that.

MR CAIN: As the Multicultural Advisory Council now stands, do you feel that it is working appropriately as a representative body to the government on multicultural issues? And, by the way, congratulations, too, as I should have said, on your appointment as the ACT Multicultural Ambassador.

Ms Puri: You said that before, too. Thanks.

MR CAIN: How do you feel the current council is working? Is it achieving the goals for the multicultural community?

Ms Puri: You mean the one who are on the Multicultural Advisory Council?

MR CAIN: Yes, the one that is advising the government.

Ms Puri: I think they are working hard, but they also have their limitations. If I were there on the Multicultural Advisory Council as a representative, I would have to abide by what is available and what they can do. I know a few people on the committee and they work really quite hard to achieve outcomes, so I am not dissatisfied at all by their efforts. They put in a good effort. And it is all voluntary, so with whatever they can do voluntarily, they are doing their best. They are my friends, so I cannot say anything against them. They do a fantastic job.

MR CAIN: That is good to hear. I am glad to hear that, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Do you have a question that you want to ask in the next 50 seconds?

MR BRADDOCK: As much as you can in 60 seconds, I would be interested in how well the ACT government provides health services to your community and some of the challenges that it experiences.

Ms Puri: Health services?

MR BRADDOCK: Yes.

Ms Puri: With the ACT, in the last year migration to the ACT has increased, and this is having a big impact on our health system, because more and more people are coming. However, I must praise ACT Health because, when COVID vaccines and everything was coming into being, they translated everything for our community. So, we were able to explain to them what was the benefit of having COVID vaccine. We had funding to do all these workshops. So they do support our community in terms of workshops, grants and interpretation services. It is a great benefit for them, and they have benefited a lot during the COVID period from being kept fully informed. Is that what your question was in terms of health?

MR BRADDOCK: Yes. Just in terms of how well you thought your community was being served by ACT Health.

Ms Puri: There are still waiting queues. People are waiting for elective surgeries. Of course, everybody is waiting because of COVID. So, they are not special in our community. But the good thing about the multicultural communities is that when we do face-to-face workshops they really listen, and it is really implemented. A lot of people are not happy about the COVID vaccine efficacy, but once we did the workshop they were fine. Once we shared the resources of the government and said, 'Look this is what is available; understand it in your own language,' it really worked. It really helped. So, I think the government is doing a good job on that. We have no concerns.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for attending today. We had 20 minutes. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank you all for attending. As I understand it there were not any questions taken on notice from this hearing but if there were you would have five days to provide a response to the committee secretary. In conclusion, thank you for coming along.

Ms Puri: Thank you for giving us this opportunity. This is my very first. I really enjoyed it.

THE CHAIR: We can tell!

Ms Puri: I do a lot of clocking off with the ABC. There are people asking me to come on. They are clocking off and they asked me for this Friday and I refused because I was coming here. I said, 'I don't have the time.' I really enjoyed it, in fact.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Ms Puri: Thank you so much for having me.

Short suspension.

MR NICOLAS LAWLER, Chief Executive Officer, Advocacy for Inclusion
MR CRAIG WALLACE, Head of Policy, Advocacy for Inclusion

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the final session of today's community day hearing for estimates. We have Advocacy for Inclusion right now, so I welcome Mr Nicolas Lawler and Craig Wallace, who are attending by telephone. I take it that your pink privilege statements have been sent to you. I just want to remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege, and draw your attention to that privilege statement. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement.

Mr Wallace: Yes.

Mr Lawler: Yes, I have read and understood the statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. We have 20 minutes scheduled for this. We have started a little bit late due to technical difficulties, so I suggest that we just take 20 minutes from here. You are welcome to make an opening statement if you like and then we can go into some questions.

Mr Wallace: Good afternoon, Chair. It is Craig Wallace here. I am happy to lead off with our opening statement. We welcome the opportunity to give evidence to budget estimates on this community day of evidence. We note that this opportunity has been re-instated, and it is a really important way for community organisations like ours to drive transparency and accountability to budget.

Community organisations like ours put a lot of work into our budget submissions and budget analysis, so this opportunity for feedback is very welcome. This is a joint submission from Women with Disabilities ACT and AFI. We act as the other main disabled people's organisation in the ACT. Our WWDACT colleagues are not available today but we will address their areas of concern as best we can but there might be some issues that we need to take on notice.

THE CHAIR: Can I just ask you what was the second organisation you were representing? I think you gave an acronym.

Mr Wallace: Women with Disabilities ACT.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr Wallace: Overall, we feel that the budget delivered measures which meet some needs of people with disability but lacked specific dedicated funding to drive whole-of-government improvements for people with disability. But we did welcome some of the individual initiatives which are important. We particularly welcomed funding for public housing, renewal growth and housing maintenance.

Problems with housing, particularly public housing, is an increasing area of our advocacy work and the advocacy issues that we deal with, especially for people having difficulties with housing transfers and maintenance and housing that is no longer

suitable for their needs over time.

Likewise, we welcome investments for health infrastructure, including at the Canberra Hospital and Calvary. We hope that that is focused on improving the accessibility of these facilities. Some of that work is now quite critical. We also welcomed funding for community infrastructure to the extent that it improves accessibility. The increase in utility concessions is really welcome as too many people with disabilities are on low income, including Jobseeker and disability support pensions.

The increase to student equity loading was welcomed, but we note this is still not enough to bridge the gap between funding for students to get into segregated settings and in mainstream settings. We also welcome some funding for equipment loans, noting that that is one year only, and funding to maintain the flexi bus transport services.

I turn to some of the gaps. We would have liked to see some more funding that demonstrated an early whole-of-government commitment to the ACT's disability strategy. The ACT government is currently embarked on a wide-ranging and inclusive consultation process for the strategy. That is really welcomed, and we understand that the strategy is still being developed. We would have liked to see some funded signature initiatives that would show that the government is committed to that work and responded to some of the pressing issues that have been surfaced by the consultation process.

For us, some of those are the need for a disability diversionary pathway out of law enforcement, work on inclusive education beyond the loadings, work on disability and health, the need for a disability-centred response to the continuing pressures and crises caused by the pandemic, action on accessible housing, and social planning work to ensure that we have accessible places, spaces, transport and community infrastructure.

On the ACT Disability health strategy, there is some money, but it looks to us that that is about the strategy development itself, and it is for one year only and it is not ongoing. It is also funded as an offset, which we think means that money has been moved within ACT Health to prioritise this. We are keen for the health strategy to address some things right now, and some of those are things have surfaced because of COVID.

Poor infrastructure, access and the lack of modern equipment to support people with disabilities during acute care stays, and low- and no-cost extended consultations and access to healthcare for people with disabilities on low incomes. Going forward, there is a set of issues around the need to address some workforce issues and attitudinal issues within the health workforce. There is a missing set of diagnostic services that are not available to people with disabilities in the ACT. We also need a strategy to address some gaps and problems at the interface between the NDIS and the ACT health system.

I will finish with just a few brief discussion points on other gaps. We would have like to see funding that responds to the needs of older people and people with disability for mental health and drug and alcohol support. There was some welcome funding in these areas for young people and other groups, but not for people with disability. The budget did not deliver money to finalise our task of meeting our OPCAT obligations in the Office of the Inspector of Corrections. We understand that they have funded a policy resource, but a preventative mechanism, for us, is about more than a staffing position.

In education, we would have liked to have seen more investment in universal learning design to ensure that the mainstream schools have good practices and inclusive materials across curricula, but also access to places and spaces where children learn. The budget included support for the planning review, but we would like to see a specific workplan around social planning to ensure that housing and planning for spaces and places is inclusive of people with disability.

Finally, but crucially, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact and fall heavily on people with disabilities. Issues for us include continuity of disability supports, safe access to healthcare by people who are immunocompromised or have a disability and need to access that care, and community development work with people who remain isolated. We are happy to take questions. I might ask if my colleague has anything that he wants to add at this time.

Mr Lawler: I am Nicholas Lawler, CEO of Advocacy for Inclusion. I have nothing further to add at this point. But thank you, Craig. I appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: I will start off with the first substantive question in relation to the ACT Disability Strategy. Obviously, that is still being worked through at the moment, but how important is funding, and should funding be put aside for that now? How urgently do new programs and initiatives need to start happening in that space?

Mr Wallace: I might take that one. Yes, it is critical that there be funding set aside for the disability strategy. We have had a number of goes at this—at whole-of-government disability strategies in the ACT, and I think the criticism from the community would be that there have tended to be aspirational statements of intended action rather than actual commitments—concrete strategies with funded initiatives, clear milestones and reporting back to community. This is the missing piece of investment that we need to ensure that the NDIS works. It is about ensuring that people with disabilities have an inclusive education system, health system, housing and other basic supports to walk into.

Some things that are really key and need concrete, specific investments we think are keeping people out of the justice system, ensuring that we have more people with disability completing education and moving into employment and the other opportunities you get from that. We need accessible housing outside of public housing here in the ACT. That involves a lot of market development work, education and funding to ensure that that happens. There is also a bunch of work around ensuring that we have good access to places, spaces and services here in the ACT. All of those things to some extent should be in the remit of the strategy.

THE CHAIR: Okay, thank you very much.

DR PATERSON: There has been mention of the ACT disability strategy, the disability health strategy and the disability justice strategy. Is it challenging to work across multiple strategies simultaneously? Do you think it is productive or not? Do you think there are better ways these things could be done?

Mr Wallace: I will probably take that question, but if my colleague wants to add any

context, that would be welcome. We do not see a real problem there, provided the ACT disability strategy appropriately incorporates and harmonises with the other strategies. There is actually a need, for instance, for discrete work to happen within disability and health, but that work will involve more than Canberra Health Services or ACT Health. It requires responses from the Community Services Directorate, and it possibly requires some funding responses involving other agencies, so it makes sense to have a strategy that links up a couple of agencies, but may not be as broad, cross-cutting and whole-of-government as the ACT disability strategy. The justice strategy is the same; it involves ACT Policing, JACS and the PACER program, which stretches across into ACT Health.

I think it would be a problem if the disability strategy starts contradicting or not providing adequate space or reference to those individual strategies and if it does not carve out its own discrete work that it needs to do. It needs to ensure that it is referencing the work that is currently going on, but that is not to say that we do not need an ACT disability strategy. There are areas where nobody is doing a lot of work, which include ensuring that planning and infrastructure across the city is done well. I think we would think that the disability strategy is a good way of doing that, and it is a good way of signalling commitment from the entire government, from the Chief Minister down, to change in this area for people with disability. And change does not just involve government.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Dr Paterson, for that supplementary question. Mr Braddock, do you have a substantive question?

MR BRADDOCK: Yes. You raised earlier the OPCAT funding for a position within the Inspector of Corrective Services. Why are you sceptical that that will not be able to achieve what is required in terms of the range of functions? How much will that shortfall be, in your estimation?

Mr Wallace: The commitment under the optional protocol is for what is called a national preventative mechanism to ensure that you have access to closed spaces, that there is preventative education work and understandings of the requirement to support the human rights of people in those closed spaces. Having a policy resource—a funded staffing position—is one thing that you might want to land it, but you also require resources and the development of educational material. There are presumably departmental committees and other work that needs to happen to drive that agenda forward.

A staffing position does not a national preventative mechanism make. It is one of the things you would need to drive the mechanism, but our view would be that there is a broader work plan around that mechanism that would not be adequately met by just having a staffing establishment. Within the other parts of the NPMs in the ACT, we understand it has been treated in that way. The Office of the Inspector General of Corrections seems to be relying on the staffing establishment covering it. We are not sure that that is enough, given what we know about the circumstances of people with a disability in the prison and in other closed places.

MR BRADDOCK: Are you saying that we might be doing well in terms of creating the policy but, in terms of the actual resources, materials and coordination, those are the function that would not be achieved? Is that a fair summary of your assessment?

Mr Wallace: We think that is a risk and it would be good to see an articulation of how that is going to be managed with our additional discrete resources, if that is the intention of government.

DR PATERSON: I was just wondering if you could articulate this. You said in the opening statement the extent to which people with a disability in the ACT remain very isolated due to COVID. I was wondering, with your work with community, can you articulate how isolated people still are and what services they are needing?

Mr Wallace: Yes. Thanks, Dr Paterson. I am happy to take that question, as well. We are in fairly regular contact with a substantial number of people with disability who continue to be shielding from the pandemic and who have not felt able to leave their homes, except for essential visits, for over 12 months now. For those people, what this looks like is many of their services and supports and informal networks are starting to fray. Those people are becoming very isolated, and they are in need of human contact but also in need of service supports and some critical interventions.

We are doing a lot of work in this area to think about what those interventions might look like, but we think a start would be doing a couple of things. Firstly, we think there needs to be a kind of guarantee that all of the services that you could access through a face-to-face visit or contact need to be mirrored as far as possible in a contact-free and online environment. We think that there needs to be some specific, articulated advice to work and study from home. We have identified the need for community development work and support for people who are isolating from COVID but still need human contact, through friendship groups, people in advocacy, mental health support, drug and alcohol support, and related services.

And, finally, we need to acknowledge that there are still places—even if you are isolating from the pandemic, like I am—that you need to go to: the doctor, the dentist and other spaces. We are hearing from people putting off those visits and doing their own dentistry because they are afraid of going into an environment where protections across the community, like masks, have been removed, and isolation requirements are being lessened. People are now afraid to go to the doctor or the dentist. Priority needs to be given to ensuring that those spaces are COVID-free through a combination of physical distancing, air filtration, masks and other requirements, so that people have confidence that they can continue to carry on in these circumstances, which remain very difficult for our people.

DR PATERSON: Thank you, Craig.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Mr Nicolas Lawler and Mr Craig Wallace for attending today's hearing. As I understand it, there were no questions taken on notice at today's hearing. Otherwise, if there were, you would have five working days to respond to the committee secretary. Once again, thank you for coming.

The committee's hearing for today is now adjourned. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all witnesses who have appeared throughout the day. If any witnesses have taken any questions on notice, could they please get those answers to the committee's support office or committee secretary within five working days of

receipt of the uncorrected proof. If members wish to lodge any questions on notice, please get those to the committee's support office or committee secretary within five working days.

This meeting is now closed.

The committee adjourned at 1.46 pm.