



**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, 2 SEPTEMBER 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.

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Privilege statement

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9 am.

Appearances:

Vassarotti, Ms Rebecca, Minister for the Environment, Minister for Heritage, Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services and Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

Ponton, Mr Ben, Director-General

Rutledge, Mr Geoffrey, Deputy Director-General, Environment, Water and Emissions Reduction

Brady, Dr Erin, Deputy Director-General; Planning and Sustainable Development

Burkevics Mr Bren, Acting Executive Group Manager, Environment, Heritage and Water

Cooney, Dr Rosie, Senior Director, Conservation Research and Evaluation

Bennett, Mr James, Executive Branch Manager, Building, Design and Projects

Green, Mr Ben, Acting Executive Group Manager, Development and Implementation

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

Lhuede, Mr Nick, Executive Branch Manager and Construction Occupations Registrar, Construction, Utilities and Environment Protection, Access Canberra

Major Projects Canberra

Edghill, Mr Duncan, Chief Projects Officer

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to the final day of public hearings for the Select Committee on Estimates 2022-2023. In the proceedings today we will examine the expenditure proposals and revenue estimates for the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, the Office of the Legislative Assembly, the Education Directorate, and the Community Services Directorate.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this 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 would be useful if witnesses could use the words, "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 first session, we will hear from the Minister for the Environment. Welcome, Ms Vassarotti and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations

afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw their attention to the privilege statement. The first time you speak, could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement.

The committee also notes that we have been provided with an opening statement for the record. Thank you, Minister. We will now proceed to questions. I will pass my first substantive across to Ms Lawder.

MS LAWDER: Minister, I would like to start with some questions about kangaroo management. What methodology is used to count how many kangaroos are in reserves? Is that methodology reviewed? If so, how regularly?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Ms Lawder, for the question. I will start by saying I have read the privilege statement and I acknowledge it.

Kangaroo management is something that has been quite extensively discussed within the Assembly. I note the response to a recent petition that was tabled in the Assembly that goes into quite a lot of detail in terms of the ways that kangaroo counts are undertaken and the scientific methods. I would like to refer to some of that, where it outlines scientific methodologies for undertaking the kangaroo surveys and population estimates.

Significant work goes into this. It looks at counting methods that are suited to individual sites. There has been quite a bit of discussion recently about a methodology around direct counts. That can be a valid methodology, and citizen science has used that. But there are some real concerns around the use of direct counts only, because we need observers to search an entire site, counting all of the individual kangaroos, without missing any, and going back again and again.

In relation to what the ACT government uses, it uses direct counts in some methods, but it also uses sweep counts and walked line transect counts. The sweep counts involve coordinated lines of people walking across the site and counting kangaroos that move through the line. Quite a lot of work goes into this. There is the use of two-way radios and maps, and it is particularly useful for larger sites, as a number of our sites are. Because of the issues around vegetation and terrain, it is a particularly useful methodology.

The other one is a walked line transect survey, which is suited for the larger sites that are much more heavily vegetated, where you cannot reliably count them on a direct basis. It takes into account landscape features like roads and water bodies. We know that those elements of the terrain impact on where kangaroos are found, so it takes that into account. Those counts also take into account the weather—if it is foggy, and things like that, it does not happen.

There is quite a lot of research and evidence that sits behind the count methodology. There was a recently reviewed peer publication. In the response to the petition, it gives a reference to that. There has also been an independent review of kangaroo population count methods undertaken by a consulting company, Kurahaupo. They have done an independent review and looked at all of the science that sits behind the management plan.

That is a fairly detailed outline of what we do. I will look to officials in terms of other elements that I have missed.

Mr Rutledge: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. As the minister was saying, there is a lot of science that goes behind this program. This is one program that we run that has enormous community interest. That level of community interest has meant that we have been working very hard to ensure that we remain accountable to our community, that we provide information to our community all the time, by way of communication tools, because this is one that, as I say, gets a lot of community interest.

Going to your specific question about the reviews, we have done a number of reviews since 2010. In 2013 we reviewed it against the National Code of Practice for Humane Shooting of Kangaroos and Wallabies for Non-commercial Purposes, and we continue with that. We have a series of reviews and independent peer-reviewed papers on our website, where we have teamed up with the Institute for Applied Ecology at UC, the Fenner School at ANU, the CSIRO, the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne, and the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions. So we have made a big effort.

We have always been assured by our own science, because the science in all of our programs is strong. We always work with our research partners. Because of the particular community interest in this program, we have tried to move it from just a science-based thing to providing communication tools, videos, fact sheets et cetera, so that the general community can understand both the value of the program and the methodologies that we use.

Minister Vassarotti outlined some of the changes that we have made in count methodology. As the science changes or the methodology is changed through our constant reviews, we, of course, update our processes.

MS LAWDER: Regarding the kangaroos that are culled and have joeys in their pouches, what happens to the joeys?

Ms Vassarotti: I will go to one of the operational staff. Dr Rosie Cooney, can you speak to that?

Dr Cooney: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The joeys are killed by what is widely recognised as the most humane method, blunt force trauma. They die instantly, and that is in line with the relevant national code of practice.

MS LAWDER: They are clubbed?

Dr Cooney: In some cases, yes.

MS LAWDER: What are the options if they are not clubbed?

Dr Cooney: I am not quite sure what you mean by the term “clubbing”.

MS LAWDER: You said “blunt force trauma”; what is blunt force trauma?

Dr Cooney: A blunt instrument will be used to kill them instantly.

MS LAWDER: What is an example of a blunt instrument?

Dr Cooney: I am not part of the operational team, so I would have to check—

Mr Rutledge: We will get an example for you on notice.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, we can provide that.

MS LAWDER: I suspect that a club might be an example.

Ms Vassarotti: The challenge, Ms Lawder, is that this part of the portfolio is responsible for the management. We are not responsible for the operations. That sits with Parks and Conservation. That is why we may not have the exact details, but we can take that on notice and speak with our colleagues about it.

MS LAWDER: Thank you. How many joeys in the past year were killed by blunt force trauma?

Mr Rutledge: Again, we can provide that number for you. As the minister says, we do not have the correct officials here, but we do release that information.

MS LAWDER: Thank you.

Ms Vassarotti: Could I note that, in the ACT, we are the only jurisdiction that looks specifically at the timing of the conservation cull. That is done specifically to ensure that we do not have an issue with joeys on foot. This places us at the forefront of best practice in terms of managing an important ecosystem, and ensuring that we are doing it in a way that uses the very best animal welfare practices. The animal welfare practices are supported by organisations such as the RSPCA.

In terms of some of the other work that we are doing, we are looking at other mechanisms of kangaroo management, including the use of fertility treatment with GonaCon, to enable us to move away from culling, whenever it is possible, while recognising the scientific basis and the need to do this in order to protect some very vulnerable ecological systems.

Mr Rutledge: As Minister Vassarotti said, the risk, if those young are not killed instantly, is that they will be predated upon, and that is an inhumane way of leaving young, either in pouch or on foot.

MS LAWDER: We talked about the ecosystem as one of the major drivers for needing a kangaroo management plan. How do you estimate the numbers of golden sun moths, legless lizards and pink-tailed worm-lizards in the area before a cull and afterwards? What evidence is there that the kangaroo management plan is working to protect other species in the ecosystem?

Ms Vassarotti: There is significant evidence put forward in terms of looking at the

ecosystems that we are managing through this program. It is primarily an issue relating to the length of grass. I will look to officials to talk through some of the specifics of what we are looking at, and what the impacts are.

In a presentation that we made to the environment committee—you might have participated in that, Ms Lawder—we provided some case studies of the quality of particular reserves, both before and after this kangaroo management strategy. Independent of the weather conditions—whether there is drought or not—you can see a significant improvement in terms of these ecosystems after the kangaroo management. We would be very happy to re-share that presentation that was provided to the committee some months ago. It provides some specific case studies so that you can see quite vividly what the impact of this management strategy has been. I will ask Dr Cooney to provide more detail in relation to that.

Dr Cooney: What we have done over a couple of decades now is to understand what kind of grassland different species need—certain woodland birds, smaller birds, larger birds, golden sun moths et cetera. We have found what we call a safe operating space of grass heights of between about five and 15 centimetres, and that is the sweet spot. If it is lower than that, species start to drop out of the system; if it is higher than that, other species start to drop out of the system. We have done that work. It is all peer reviewed, it is open access and anybody can read it.

We have also done an enormous amount of work to understand what number of kangaroos gives you grass at around that height. Every single year, we go and assess the height of the grass in all of the managed reserves, and we also count all the kangaroos, as we discussed earlier. Over time, we are calibrating, and we are getting quite precise about working out exactly how many kangaroos have to be removed from that system in order to give us a good, healthy ecosystem, with grass at the right height to support the species that we want to provide a habitat for.

Mr Burkevics: I acknowledge that I have read the privilege statement. Further to the minister's and Dr Cooney's comments, what has been in the ACT's favour this year is increased rainfall. That has contributed to higher levels of grass growth. As a result, the length of grass in many of the reserves is a lot higher than it typically has been. As noted in this year's kangaroo cull program, there has been a reduced number of sites that the teams have had to visit, so a lower target number of kangaroos has been required.

DR PATERSON: I would like to move the conversation to the GonaCon treatment. When you google it, it looks like it has been used in larger animals like deer and horses, and there seems to be quite a bit of evidence there, but very little evidence comes up for kangaroos. There is a paper that was published last year, and it says, "To date, studies addressing the effect of fertility control on the growth of macropod populations have been limited, but are essential to enable full evaluation of the efficacy and cost-benefit analysis of these approaches." Firstly, is what we are doing here with this treatment experimental? Secondly, how are you measuring the efficacy and what is the cost-benefit analysis of this?

Ms Vassarotti: Certainly, on the use of GonaCon, the ACT has been a real leader in relation to this work. As you rightly point out, in other contexts it has primarily been used for other species. The ACT government has been working with a range of research

institutions over a long period of time. I will go to officials shortly in terms of the specifics of how long this treatment has been trialled in the ACT.

Until last year, we had been trialling the use of GonaCon over a long period of time, in partnership with the CSIRO and other research institutions. We did find that it was being particularly effective, and it is particularly effective for some populations in fenced communities, for instance; that is a way that it can be used particularly effectively.

Last year, given the proven efficacy of the program, we integrated it as part of our ongoing program. Now it is an integrated part of our kangaroo management strategy. On a straight cost-benefit analysis, year to year, GonaCon is a more expensive management practice. But what we see from the modelling is that the sustained use of GonaCon over a period of time will significantly reduce the need for culling and will, in the long term, provide a good cost-benefit analysis. Again, I will refer to officials in terms of some of the details of that.

At this point, particularly because of some of the constraints around the delivery mechanism, we do not see that we will be able to use it to completely replace current kangaroo management strategies. But there might be changes in technology, in delivery mechanisms, which mean that in the future we might be able to look at different uses. That is part of the contribution that the ACT is making in terms of taking that research forward.

It is now fully integrated into the program, but there is still ongoing research and scientific analysis in terms of the use of the program now. I will ask Dr Cooney to fill in the details.

Dr Cooney: I agree with the minister in that it has rarely been used in wallabies, in macropods, outside the ACT. It has been used in one wallaby elsewhere in Australia. The ACT have been pioneers in this area. Last year, one of our ecologists published a paper on this work done in the ACT, an ecological management and—

DR PATERSON: That is the one I am reading.

Dr Cooney: Claire Wimpenny is our senior macropod ecologist who is currently overseeing our program. There was also an earlier PhD done, which has not yet been published, by another one of our ecologists—again, on macropods in the ACT. We have really pushed the research forward in this area.

It is a really promising technique with kangaroos. It has really good results. So far, the results with wallabies, which can be problematic in fenced reserves, are less encouraging, but there is potential there as well. We have pioneered the use of dart delivery, which is a lot easier on the animal than being first anaesthetised and then hand injected with GonaCon.

It is not necessarily going to work everywhere. If you have a high level of immigration and emigration of kangaroos out of an area, you cannot really control the population by doing this vaccination of females in the area. We do have a lot of grassland reserves that effectively are quite isolated in the landscape. Of course, we have the fenced areas

of Mulligans Flat and Goorooyarloo. It is really well suited to those areas.

DR PATERSON: What is the cost per kangaroo of this program?

Dr Cooney: That is a very good question.

Ms Vassarotti: That is potentially something that we would need to take on notice because I know that we have done that.

Mr Rutledge: Yes, we have provided that answer to the committee in the past, so we will find that out. As the minister said, we are still in our research phase and we are developing data delivery. This is possibly why the ACT is the only one using this, because it is a very high cost in comparison to straight shooting. Anywhere else, where you would be doing it on a commercial scale, if you had no scientific rationale for doing it, you would not use GonaCon. We are doing it, as the minister said, because we think, long term, it could pay off, but it is a higher cost delivery mechanism. We will dig out the figures.

DR PATERSON: What is the payoff, apart from not killing a kangaroo?

Ms Vassarotti: Over time, it will have a cost-benefit ratio because over a period—again, we will pull out the figures; from memory, over a 10-year period—it will actually pay off, because you will actually be using less traditional methods. While it is an expensive per kangaroo cost, it is something that lasts for five to eight years—over a period of time. There are fewer kangaroos to manage as well.

DR PATERSON: Surely, this will impact on kangaroo behaviour? Potentially, with the female kangaroos, if they are not having joeys every single year, there will be implications for their biology. Are there studies on this or is that something that you are monitoring—and if it makes them sick?

Ms Vassarotti: Certainly, there is a lot of research being done. I will ask Dr Cooney to provide an answer.

Dr Cooney: We have had experimental populations that have been tracked for around six years, and each female does get to reproduce at least once. Any female who initially receives the treatment will have a small joey. We know that all females get to breed at least once. So far, there have been no detectable detrimental effects on their behaviour, and that study has been for quite a few years now.

DR PATERSON: With the particular zone where you will use this treatment, if you use it only once every five years, how do you know that you have treated that kangaroo in that year?

Dr Cooney: The females are ear tagged so that they can be identified.

DR PATERSON: Do you get up close to them to treat them?

Dr Cooney: Yes, they are anaesthetised from about 30 metres. All of the ones that have been treated at the moment are ear tagged. We might not always use that approach in

the future, but, currently, every female who has been vaccinated has been tagged.

DR PATERSON: Is the anaesthetisation of the kangaroo included in the cost of this treatment?

Dr Cooney: Yes.

Ms Vassarotti: We think that this is an important complementary treatment. We are absolutely committed to protecting our ecosystem. The people who are working on all of these programs are doing so because they love our nature, and they love wildlife. No-one likes to be in a situation where we need to do a kangaroo cull. It is something that we know we need to do. We know there is strong evidence about it. We know that we are absolutely on the front line of ensuring that we do not lose species forever, so it is an important thing to be doing.

We think that the use of strategies like GonaCon can move us forward even more, in terms of using mechanisms that support the range of values that we have as a community. We think that it is a really important strategy. It is important for issues beyond the economics of it, in terms of showing the community our commitment to manage kangaroos in the most humane and the most appropriate way possible.

Mr Burkevics: Dr Paterson, thank you for your interest in GonaCon. Further to the minister's remarks, it would be worth noting, for context, that the delivery of GonaCon into the forward years is strictly regulated under the Nature Conservation Act. In one of my other capacities, as conservator, I consider and issue licences to support the program. The program is subject to external review, and external consideration under the Nature Conservation Act, which is also subject to ethics-type considerations.

I congratulate the team that have been working on this for decades, with both CSIRO and organisations in the United States, to develop the vaccine and trial it here. This is world-leading scientific research and delivery that is having positive impacts. At the moment we are actively considering future opportunities for that program based on its success so far.

THE CHAIR: Given the significant reduction in kangaroo culls, will additional bushfire preventive measures be put in place?

Ms Vassarotti: The cull is done for conservation purposes. It is not used as a bushfire management strategy. That is an important statement to make. There is a suggestion around the reasons why we do this; it is absolutely around conservation and the conservation of a specialised ecological community. It is not used as a bushfire management strategy. It is not connected to that at all.

MS LAWDER: Could I go back to the removal of joeys from the pouch? They are dispatched using blunt force trauma, which may or may not be a club; that is yet to be advised. You said you would take on notice the number of joeys that have been removed this year. Surely, you get that information. How else do you plan for future-year culls if you do not have information about new populations?

Mr Rutledge: Ms Lawder, I have the daily shift totals. If I do the mental computation,

I will be able to give you the answer here. It is just that I do not have an easy answer to give you straightaway. We do have that; so we know what is culled in any one season. Before we get to the next season, we do the recounts, as the minister said. The assessment is done; it is provided to the conservator to agree a number. The operational staff do that in each of the different grasslands.

Ms Vassarotti: Could I reiterate that the way that the cull is managed is in compliance with the National Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos and Wallabies for Non-commercial Purposes. We do an audit of that process. In 2023 we will have an independent veterinary audit of the program to ensure that we are in absolute compliance. The mechanisms that are used by the operational team are absolutely in line with that code of practice. As I said before, it is supported by organisations such as the RSPCA.

MR BRADDOCK: Moving on to weeds, I know that a lot of Landcare groups are struggling to stay on top of weeds at the moment, due to the La Niña conditions. I want to check what the government is doing. I also note, from the table on page 19, regarding the area treated to reduce the risk of invasive species, that we did not meet our target there. I would be interested to hear what is happening.

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks very much, Mr Braddock, for the question. The issue of weeds, particularly as we stare down the barrel potentially of a third La Niña season, is something that is very much on the mind of government land managers, as well as our incredible environmental volunteers, who do fantastic work in complementing the work of government in this area.

Invasive species has been a key focus of government over previous years. In the 2021-22 budget, we provided a \$2.968 million investment over the next four years to further manage particularly new and invasive species. As part of that we set up a rapid response team to support the identification and eradication of pest species, particularly new and emerging ones.

In relation to the operational work over the past couple of years, there have been some constraints in terms of the ability of operational teams to get out and do some of this work. Obviously, the lockdown period provided some impediments. In particular, the weather patterns and a very wet season have meant that it has been difficult at times for contractors to get out there when they had been scheduled to do so, and we have had a particularly wet season.

Certainly, the budget is there. The intention is that if there have been weather impacts, crews will be able to get out a bit later. I will look to officials in terms of the specifics around what has occurred. One of the things to note is that we are lucky in relation to our data management in terms of the management of weed species, not only by government agencies but also by environmental volunteers. We have some fantastic digital tools, which means that we can track what is going on pretty well at the point at which it is happening, with real-time data. I look to officials in terms of the specifics about our targets this year.

Mr Rutledge: I will finish off the final bit; then I will ask Mr Burkevics to add to this. On the digital tools, the minister is right. We now have handheld devices—whether it

is for our contractors, our paid staff or volunteers. In real time, when they do their weeding, they pull out their mobile phone or their iPad, tap it in, and that goes back to HQ. We can watch their work throughout the process.

We also use drone technology to work out where to do some of the invasive species work. We have this real-time data which shows where we are, rather than by walking, which is how we would have done it a few years ago. It is about keeping on top of it. If we need to re-weed, obviously, our methodologies are not proving effective. That is a new tool in the kitbag. Mr Burkevics is more across what has been happening recently.

Mr Burkevics: Further to the minister's comments about government investment in the biosecurity response in the last budget, and the enhancement, that has made a significant difference to the ability of EPSDD to be able to respond quickly to weed infestations across the ACT, based on advice we receive from the community. As the minister mentioned, we recognise our wonderful volunteer groups in the community in detecting and reporting weeds; they are fantastic.

I have a good example from July on how the process works. On Tuggeranong Hill, Coolatai grass was detected by one of our Parks and Conservation Service rangers. Coolatai grass is an invasive species from Africa. It is fire adaptive, it competitively excludes Australian native grasses and it elevates fire dangers in the area. We have only had three other infestations in the ACT, which have all been contained and monitored.

Thanks to that augmented capacity, we were able to respond very quickly. I am told that the tagline for this group is "go hard, go early", as our biosecurity response. It is a credit to their enthusiasm in responding to the community detections of weeds. I commend that team. They were able to get onsite very quickly, map the area of infestation and take action as appropriate to eliminate that infestation. The action, typically, is either burning or spraying. They were then able to continue monitoring that area for a period of time, to ensure that the eradication was effective and the weeds essentially were eliminated. God help you if you are a weed, in some instances, because this team is very well equipped to respond quickly across the ACT. That example on Tuggeranong Hill is a great tangible result for the government investment in an enhanced response.

Ms Vassarotti: We are committed to continuing to work to get even better in this area. A weeds forum was held late last year. It brought together environmental volunteers and land managers to talk about better integration. This week I met with Friends of Grasslands, and we were talking about how we join up, even better, the work that is happening with volunteers and land managers.

There is quite a lot of conversation in the biodiversity and conservation working group that has been established. It is co-chaired by the Conservation Council and the conservator. Weeds are a significant conversation point in that forum. This is an area where there will always be an opportunity to ensure that we connect with our different land managers and volunteers, and put our efforts into the areas where it will make the most difference.

MR BRADDOCK: Given La Niña conditions can apparently impact weeding operations, from what you said earlier, how will we cope in the next season, given that

we face a third La Niña in a row?

Ms Vassarotti: With adaptability and agility. One of the interesting things that has occurred throughout this period is that both our paid staff and our volunteers have shown incredible resilience. They have also shown adaptability. The use of the digital tools is important because we are able to be much more agile in how we respond to conditions and how we know when we need to go to a particular area. The officials might have more to add.

Mr Rutledge: The easy trade-off is that, in a wet season, you do not do so much bushfire prevention; in a dry season, you spend more time doing bushfire prevention. It is more complex than that, but that is a simple way of thinking about it. We redirect our resources. At the moment repairing roads due to wet weather is a big effort for us, and weeding is a big effort for us—weeding, particularly—as well as other invasive species.

MR BRADDOCK: TCCS told us the other day that they have a priority list that is longer than they will be able to work through, so I am concerned about the level of integration between your efforts and theirs, and the level of risk that their uncompleted work may present to you.

Ms Vassarotti: The issue of integration of the different land managers, particularly in the urban space versus the more non-urban space, is a work in progress. We are really lucky in terms of the public servants working across these areas. We have really dedicated professionals. There has been some nice sharing of personnel across different areas that have been able to bring different perspectives and an understanding of how different agencies work. These agencies are actually located in the same building—on the same floor, in some cases—and that kind of physical proximity also helps. But it is absolutely a work in progress.

There are a couple of exciting programs happening at the moment, which also provide us with an opportunity to have the two agencies more closely aligned. On EPSDD's side, in the work that we are doing around connectivity, we are working closely with TCCS. Conversely, the work they are doing around their urban open space planning means that they are also engaging with EPSDD staff. There are some good opportunities through some targeted programs to make that integration work much more closely.

MS LAWDER: We have talked about the fact that you did not meet the target for the area treated because of wet weather and the lockdown, and that La Niña is expected again this year. How will you catch up in a non La Niña year? How will you catch up on the treatment of invasive species that may be falling a bit behind at the moment?

Ms Vassarotti: I will look to officials to respond to the question in relation to a view that we are falling behind.

MS LAWDER: You failed to meet the target.

Ms Vassarotti: We did not meet the target in the reporting period, but my understanding is that resources are now being put forward in order to do that catch-up. Certainly, in terms of the resource allocation, we have had a significant increase in resources. The resources are there to be able to meet what we are trying to achieve in

terms of invasive species management. In terms of the operational rollout, I will hand over to officials.

Mr Rutledge: We did not meet the target. Part of that, as it says in the footnote, was COVID and part of it was movement restrictions. Part of it was illness. A lot of our staff, as is the case across the community, were ill in that reporting period.

With respect to the way we will catch up, to use your term, it is about the way that we are doing it. As the minister and I have said, it is about getting the right target and targeting the right areas. We are always looking for different methodologies. We are not just relying on chemicals; sometimes we do hand ripping and sometimes we do grazing. We use different methodologies.

Right across the community, we have all been disrupted over the past two years. As I said, we will redeploy or reprioritise invasive species work over, say, bushfire prevention, to use a simple analogy. I think we will remain on it, but Minister Gentleman, Minister Vassarotti and the community are very aware of the issues, as has been raised. I am sure that, if we need further investment, we will bring that back to government.

MS LAWDER: It seems that almost every year there is some new invasive species that comes along. We have had everything: serrated tussock, fireweed and lovegrass; you name it. Now potentially there is the Coolatai grass that we have spoken about. The parliamentary agreement talks about an increased funding for weeds and invasive species management of \$7.5 million over four years. It does not look like that will be achieved at this point—or will it all come in one year?

Ms Vassarotti: We have had significant additional investment of \$2.9 million. The issue of biosecurity is increasingly an issue. You are exactly right. Part of this is around having a conversation with the commonwealth government as well. The issue of invasive species and biosecurity more generally is something that in recent times has had a lot more focus, and we will certainly work with commonwealth colleagues.

We will continue to talk with our government colleagues about the need to invest in this area. I would suggest that we have made a really good start. We need to make sure that, with investment, we have the capacity to roll it out. The issue of biosecurity is an increasingly important part of the conversation.

One of the exciting things about the investment that has been made and the establishment of the rapid response team is that, if we do exactly what the response team is focused on—going hard and going early—the issues that we might have down the track if we do not do that will be much more contained, and it is a much more economical way to deal with this issue. That is absolutely the way we are framing this. We are looking at the management of invasive species, particularly new invasive species.

With climate change this is a bigger issue, and biosecurity is a bigger issue. That might be something that we want to talk about in this session. With respect to some of the threats that we have seen in our jurisdiction, we have had more biosecurity threats in the last period than we have had for many years. They are really significant, whether it

be the Varroa mite or the prospect of foot and mouth. Invasive species sit within the context of biosecurity. We need to grapple with this issue at a community level. We will need to look at our level of investment and increase that investment over time.

DR PATERSON: Minister, my question is in respect of wombats. When you google Molonglo Valley environmental assessment reports, wombats do not come up once—not that I can find. I would like to understand what level of assessment was done of the wombat populations in Molonglo Valley, for all of that development. What seems to come through is that the environmental assessments look at threatened species and migrant tree species, of which wombats are neither.

When you see the bulldozers going over the Molonglo hills and areas, every other animal can run away, but there is no culling of wombats, and there is no transportation of wombats out of their burrows before that work happens. The assumption is that these wombats get crushed or buried. I would like to know what the government is doing to ensure that wombats are removed from these areas or culled, in this situation where we have very large-scale development.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Dr Paterson, for the question. That question potentially strays into areas that sit beyond my portfolio responsibilities, particularly in terms of some of the planning assessment tools. Certainly, within the Molonglo River corridor, there are wombats. I was doing a platypus survey there a couple of weeks ago, and we had to make sure that we did not fall down wombat holes. Certainly, in some of the reserve areas, wombats are absolutely present within the environment.

Certainly, within my portfolio responsibilities, with respect to the support for understanding where wombats are, we have been trying to support that work through initiatives which include setting up the wombat portal. People can identify where they have seen wombats, and particularly where they need assistance because they are dealing with mangle and things like that. We can provide some information on that.

In terms of my responsibilities, I have been very much focused on ensuring that we are tapping into our citizen science, to ensure that we have a good understanding of where wombats are within the landscape, and that we support wombat rescue and the management agencies. I will look to Mr Ponton, because the environmental assessment processes sit within planning.

DR PATERSON: Before we do that, Minister, it is within your remit to look after the animals and protect the animals. With respect to all of this development that is going on, we know from the citizen science that the nature reserves and the land around Molonglo Valley are being mapped, as to where the live wombat burrows are. You can see them everywhere. There is a big wombat population. In terms of what is going on, we know that there would be wombat burrows in these massive development areas.

Ms Vassarotti: In terms of my responsibilities around being environment minister, with the obligations that we have under the Nature Conservation Act, it is absolutely imperative that we ensure that they are being met. We also need to ensure that the environmental assessment processes are in place. I will go to the director-general, because it is an area in which I do not have direct levers, in terms of development

activities after the environmental assessments have been done.

Mr Ponton: Thank you, Minister. I have read and understood the privilege statement. As the minister said, the question probably is better directed to the minister for planning. But, given that I am here, I will talk in general terms. Absolutely, for a development of this kind a range of environmental assessments are undertaken. That does consider all impacts on the environment. Certainly, there is a focus on those endangered species because the impact is likely to be greater. That does not mean that we do not consider other impacts also. That is done both through the development and assessment process but, before that, often in such circumstances, through an environmental impact assessment.

In the case of the Molonglo Valley there was also a strategic environmental assessment that was considered and endorsed by the commonwealth government. That considers, as I said, not just the endangered and threatened species but all impacts on environment, water, soils—all of those sorts of things that we need to consider. Linked to that, through those processes we also engage with the Conservator of Flora and Fauna, but there are certain constraints in relation to what the conservator's role is, given the obligations under the Nature Conservation Act.

I guess that is a long way of saying that all of these matters are certainly considered in terms of understanding the impacts. I would need to, if you wanted me to, have a closer look at what happened in relation to those assessments at the time because some of those are ageing now, specifically in relation to wombats.

Ms Vassarotti: One of the comments that I would make, Dr Paterson, is on a really important conversation that we are having within the portfolio, particularly around climate change and climate adaption. A lot of our work has been focused on threatened species. There is an emerging conversation around common species and how we support common species to make sure that they do not become endangered species.

There was a very significant forum that happened, about six months ago, around climate adaption, where members of the EPSDD team came together with scientists and other areas to really start to grapple with this issue. Our approvals under the EPBC Act for instance, do primarily focus on threatened species, and you would hope they would have a flow-on effect for common species. But this is an issue that we do need to be more focused on. I think there is work to do locally. We will be looking at our nature conservation strategy, which is due for a refresh in 2023, as well as the EPBC Act.

DR PATERSON: But, Minister, while everyone is looking at all these things there are wombats in burrows that are being crushed by machinery in Molonglo.

Ms Vassarotti: I have to say, Dr Paterson, that that has not been put to me up until today. I have not had a representation that there are wombats being crushed through development activities in the Molonglo Valley. That is the first time that that has been put to me. I will certainly take advice from the conservator, in terms of obligations under the Nature Conservation Act, to see if there is, firstly, an investigation around that issue; and, secondly, if there are levers and offences. But that is the first time that that proposition has been put to me. I am very happy to work with your office regarding allegations of that activity and to work with the conservator in responding to that issue.

Mr Ponton: Minister, the conservator is comfortable to make a few comments about that.

Ms Vassarotti: That would be great. Thank you.

Mr Burkevics: Yes. Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Dr Paterson. As reiterated by the minister, that matter has not been brought to my attention, as the conservator, either. It would be of a serious concern if that was occurring.

What I can confirm, based on the advice that I have been given—and it is only in the past couple of days—is that wombats actually have multiple burrows. The matter that has caught my eye recently is the threat to wombats from road traffic accidents in recent days. We work closely with ACT Wildlife. They receive funding under a program of the ACT government to assist and respond, and to care for injured wombats or those that have been displaced.

I am very happy to, as the minister has remarked, support assistance into that matter. But I have had no information. There is a very, very strong program and engagement between officers of conservation research and ACT Wildlife in relation to a number of wombat matters—mange and other care and protection measures that are necessary.

DR PATERSON: Has there been any consideration of how wombats get themselves out of these development areas? They are in burrows during the day. Every other animal can hop off or fly off or crawl off. What consideration has there been? If people have concerns about this, can they raise them directly with you?

Mr Burkevics: I would be very happy to take that question on notice, to seek advice on what measures are undertaken to survey the sites and so on, and provide that.

MS LAWDER: Minister, I want to ask about a line item in the budget. I think it is budget statements E, page 26, table 27. It is titled, “Savings—maintaining accountability and transparency of government.” Can you elaborate on what that is? Why are we not doing something that was previously scheduled?

Ms Vassarotti: I might ask officials to elaborate on that, because it does sit across a number of portfolio areas.

Mr Ponton: It does. I will go to Mr Rutledge shortly. That is a whole-of-government initiative that is relevant to all directorates. That is why it is appearing in our budget paper.

Mr Rutledge: Yes. Thanks, Ms Lawder, for the question. Sometimes when a function is centralised, the funding is provided to CMTEDD, so they will have a budget initiative of a positive and then all the other agencies contribute to that. This one was around accountability. It was actually around FOI measures and getting further support for the centre for that. That came at a cost to the other directorates, as part of that function, and got provided to the centre. As the minister and Mr Ponton said, you will see that for all agencies, and then there will be a positive initiative for CMTEDD.

MS LAWDER: Was it to improve FOI measures? Did you say that was the intent?

Mr Rutledge: To streamline and provide stronger advice from the centre on FOI matters.

MS LAWDER: All right. Good. Hopefully it will improve the FOI process, which I think has been under discussion in some other sessions this week.

Mr Rutledge: Well discussed this week, Ms Lawder.

MS LAWDER: Thanks. Feral animal management control: does the ACT government still use 1080 bait in any circumstances?

Ms Vassarotti: I will look to officials to provide some further detail. It is used in some instances. I might look to Dr Cooney to provide some advice in relation to its use and the restrictions on its use.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister. I can pick that one up.

Ms Vassarotti: Sorry, Conservator.

Mr Burkevics: That is all right. Tag team on that one. Thank you, Ms Lawder, for your interest in 1080. 1080 is an important part of our baiting program for wild dogs and dingoes. It is used around areas of the national park, in particular the buffer areas between areas of conservation and the livestock areas that fall outside of the national park, particularly the areas to the east and the south. Sadly, we do occasionally get instances of wild dog attacks in areas of livestock. The program for that is put in place by the government, in terms of trapping wild dogs, as well as 1080 baiting programs. That does help to create a buffer area and minimise—I think it is fair to say that it would never eliminate—the chances of wild dog attacks.

I think it is important also to note that wild dogs and dingoes do play an important role in the ecosystem. They are a top-order predator and they do play a role. I think there is a lot more research we need to know about the role of top-order predators and wild dogs and dingoes in the national park. That is something that Dr Cooney and I have spoken about only recently—commissioning some further research. There is a PhD in there somewhere. I am sure of it. We certainly view that 1080, at the moment, is a proven and effective tool in the toolbox for managing effectively wild dogs and dingoes, in addition to trapping measures.

MS LAWDER: It does cause a pretty ugly death—1080 bait. Are there any alternatives?

Mr Burkevics: As I mentioned, the alternative which is quite effective is trapping, and that is a safe and humane measure to manage wild dogs. We have a wild dog trapper and, through government investment, there is additional enhancement happening in relation to wild dog management in Namadgi National Park. We have been provided assistance from New South Wales on several occasions, as well as contractors, with regard to trapping.

From memory, over the past year, there have been about three wild dogs caught, following some instances in New South Wales just close to the border. My sense is that there is a very reasonable program happening at the moment that balances both the recognition that wild dogs do have a conservation value, or a top-order predator value, as well as balancing the potential impacts on rural lessees to the east and south of Namadgi National Park. We have regular liaisons with those rural lessees. They have given their assistance to the ACT for wild dog control.

MS LAWDER: Thanks. Can you outline the process? Do you start with non-poisoned meat to attract the dingoes and wild dogs and then move on to baiting?

Mr Burkevics: We are straying into very operational territory. In my three months in the role, I have not yet had the opportunity to venture into the depths of the program. I think it is fair to say that we apply the practices recommended by the manufacturer of 1080—and they are available online—to deliver the baiting program. Just to pick up on your point about causing a poor death to the animal, I would need to seek advice on that. I am not confident on that. I would need to seek advice, according to the manufacturer and our own observations and experiences; but I think it is fair to say that we apply the manufacturer's recommended approach to the delivery of 1080.

MS LAWDER: It is my understanding that the RSPCA have long been against the use of 1080. Not long ago we talked about the RSPCA's support for the way the kangaroo cull is carried out, so why is it that we value the views of the RSPCA in one area of the conservation portfolio but not in another?

Ms Vassarotti: I do not think it would be fair to say that we do not value the RSPCA's views. We absolutely value the RSPCA's views. One of the challenges is balancing the risks and the opportunities for alternative practices. The use of poisons across the environment is something that, as a government, we are really looking at to see what we can do and how we can minimise impacts in the environment. An example of that is that I was recently on the public record talking about the issue of rodenticides, and particularly the impact of second generation rodenticides on wildlife. It is really about looking at the range of tools that we have in the toolbox. In the area of wild dog management, we are constrained at times by the limitations of the number of tools within the toolbox, but we continue to work on ways that we can manage invasive species and pests in the environment in a way that is most humane.

MS LAWDER: Are dingoes counted as an invasive species?

Ms Vassarotti: There are issues around wild dogs. I might look to the conservator to provide the specifics.

MS LAWDER: Sorry; I thought that was what you were just referring to. Wild dogs and dingoes was the original response.

Ms Vassarotti: I am just not sure. I do not want to give you the wrong information on how we specify dingoes in particular.

Mr Burkevics: Dr Cooney, I think, has the genetics of wild dogs and dingoes. It is a quite complex technical issue. It might be fair to invite the expert to make remarks.

MS LAWDER: Sure. I just thought that the minister was talking about invasive species, and we were talking on the whole about wild dogs and dingoes.

Ms Vassarotti: That is why I am deferring to the expert, to ensure that we are crisp and clear in our language. Apologies if I have created confusion.

Dr Cooney: On the genetics, our wild dogs, dingoes, here have a proportion of dog genes mixed in, but they are overwhelmingly genetically dingo.

MS LAWDER: Do you know whether they are counted as an invasive species, as we seem to have vaguely implied just before?

Mr Rutledge: They are counted as a pest species. When they attack and landholders find their sheep have been killed by a wild dog or dingo, they are called a feral pest species.

Ms Vassarotti: They would fall under the ACT Pest Animal Management Strategy, as a way of managing those. Apologies that I have created confusion. It is pest management.

Mr Rutledge: Ms Lawder, as Mr Burkevics said, when they are deep in Namadgi we do not mind. They are an apex predator. They do not create an issue. Where they do create an issue is on the fringe of Namadgi, where they are seen to attack domestic animals.

MS LAWDER: Understood.

Mr Rutledge: So that is where we take action.

MS LAWDER: Thank you.

DR PATERSON: Are we just calling them wild dogs when it suits us, so that it is more like an invasive species? We don't say, "Dingoes ate all the sheep." Are we using the language selectively on this issue?

Mr Rutledge: Wild dogs is probably more correct, but, as Dr Cooney said, they are genetically dingoes. The only time we take action against them is when they are creating a pest for rural lessees.

DR PATERSON: Did I not hear correctly, though, that they are mainly dingo genetics?

Mr Rutledge: You did. Genetically, they are mainly dingoes. When they create a pest to the community, that is when we take action.

DR PATERSON: Sure. But I guess a pest, like a native species, is different to an invasive species.

MS LAWDER: Feral cats.

Mr Rutledge: Yes; correct.

DR PATERSON: So perhaps we need to be a bit more clear in the way we represent this issue?

Mr Rutledge: Yes, perhaps.

Ms Vassarotti: Part of the challenge, Dr Paterson, is that it has been a bit unclear. Our understanding of the genetic make-up is something that has emerged over time. That is why we generally talk about wild dogs and dingoes, because it has been somewhat unclear. The evidence is emerging. As the conservator noted, there are some real opportunities to look at the role of dingoes, particularly in the national parks, as an apex predator. They are providing a really significant and useful role in the broader ecosystem. I will just put on the table that our scientific understanding is evolving, and particularly in the area of genetics. This is an area that has moved pretty quickly in a short period of time. I think that it would be unfair to suggest that language is being used maliciously. It is a shifting understanding about what we are managing within the landscape.

MS LAWDER: I find it confusing. Can you explain to me why native animals, such as dingoes, notwithstanding the impact on farm animals, agricultural animals, would be treated in the same way as feral cats or feral dogs, domestic animals that might have gone feral? Is it that we lump dingoes in with those feral animals? Is that what we are saying?

Ms Vassarotti: We have not even talked about feral cats. I think it is interesting that you point out—

MS LAWDER: I am just asking about the language.

Mr Rutledge: I am not sure that we are making the right distinction. When we have an overabundant species, whether it is native or introduced, such as kangaroos, which we have talked about today, we manage the overabundance of that species for the protection of the ecosystem. Where we have invasive species, be they weeds or deer or other large hooved animals, again, we protect the ecosystem. When there is damage—in the case of cats there is damage to native birds, as well as other birds, and in the case of wild dogs they damage domestic livestock—that is where we take action. So the distinction is—

MS LAWDER: It is the dingoes part that I guess I am more interested in—lumping the dingoes in as feral animals. We do not say feral kangaroos, for example.

Mr Rutledge: Yes, if dingoes were attacking sheep, I think the community would expect us to take action against dingoes. If wild dogs were attacking sheep, I think the community would expect us to take action. I am not sure that they are native. What we are treating is the impact on the community. Their genetic make-up does not mean that we would not treat the impact on the community.

DR PATERSON: But I think there is social licence that is given if it is a wild dog. My long-term impression was that a wild dog was a domestic dog gone feral and bred in

the bush, and it was distinct from a dingo. In all the invasive species that you just mentioned, not one single one of those—weeds, cats, deer—is native. I agree: if dingoes are eating sheep, something needs to be done about the dingoes. If the wild dog population is predominantly dingo, that is just a bit more of an honest way of talking about it, I think.

Ms Vassarotti: As I said before, our scientific understanding of the animals that we are dealing with is rapidly shifting. People's impressions have come from a scientific understanding at a point in time, which is shifting. That is the point that I am making.

MS LAWDER: Who would have thought: Dr Paterson and I on the same ticket!

Mr Burkevics: Dr Paterson, it is an interesting discussion. If it helps, I can outline, perhaps, some of the tiers of plans that help government guide the control of wild dogs and dingoes. I have only recently been briefed on this issue, which is really great. At the top level, the ACT is a signatory to the Australian Pest Animal Strategy 2017-2027 and that is under the Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity.

As the minister remarked earlier, the biosecurity spectrum is broad—everything from animal diseases to weeds and animals. It is broad and it is an enlivened higher threat environment at the moment. Under the strategy, we have the National Wild Dog Action Plan 2020-2030. These are all available online. That is a nationally agreed framework that promotes and supports a strategic risk-based approach to wild dogs, including dingoes, feral dogs and their hybrids. I think that, as the minister remarked, this is where the complexity comes in—when you have got that hybrid effect, if you like. That action plan advocates the effective, coordinated and humane management of wild dogs where they pose a risk or impact upon agricultural biodiversity or social assets.

Under that, to guide the ACT, the ACT's Pest Animal Management Strategy 2012-2022 describes the current approach to pest animal management in the ACT. In this strategy, the ACT has formally recognised that wild dogs and dingoes can be managed on rural properties to protect landowner livelihoods. But dingoes are a declared pest animal under the ACT's Pest Plants and Animals Act 2005 and under the declaration. Listing them as a pest animal excludes them from protection as a native animal under the Nature Conservation Act 2014. The ACT Pest Animal Management Strategy does recognise that, while wild dogs perform an important role as a higher-order predator, where they are interfering with or impacting on livestock-type areas then actions can be taken to manage that effect. As you can see, there is quite a tier of plans and strategies to manage the complexity of the genetic mixing of wild dogs and dingoes.

MR BRADDOCK: I just want to ask a bit about environmental protection. We had Minister Cheyne here the other day, representing the Access Canberra side of how Environment and Access Canberra are working together with the EPA. I would be interested, now, in the environment side, in terms of what you are hoping to get out of that initiative.

Ms Vassarotti: Sure. Thank you, Mr Braddock, for the question. This is a really important area that I am quite excited to be working with Minister Cheyne on, particularly given some of the observations by the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment in the water waste report. I think the issue of how we manage our

Environment Protection Authority is a really important one. It was really great to be able to partner with Minister Cheyne on quite a significant budget initiative that has seen investment in two additional environment protection officers who will sit within Access Canberra to support the compliance monitoring and regulatory oversight activities.

There is also funding to support the development of a review of the Environment Protection Authority, and particularly the policies and procedures that sit in it. I know that the Environmental Defenders Office has been doing some really interesting work on how environment protection laws are working across Australia. I think there are some really useful insights, at a national level and also locally, in terms of how we might look at the legislation, policy and procedures to work much better.

The right to a healthy environment is also an important piece of work that will have implications for the way that we deal with environment protection matters in the ACT. In relation to EPSDD, they have already got a project that is looking at the legislation and the policies and procedures, and how the different arrangements come together. We are looking at the recommendations about how we might want to shape and shift that a little bit. I might look to Mr Burkevics or Mr Rutledge to add something.

Mr Rutledge: Only further to say, Minister, that there have been two significant changes. One is the Environmental Defender's Office report, which compared the EPAs around Australia and outlined quite clearly what the principles of a highly functioning EPA are. That review has been done and published, and that gives us a good starting point. The second one is that EPAs, not so much in Australia but overseas, have really injected climate change and the effects of climate into environment protection. We have kind of been doing that through our own regulatory framework but have not injected it high up in the principles of the EPA Act. So I think that is another one.

The third thing that is more recent is that, since the election of the federal Labor government, they have said that they are looking at not only the EPBC reforms that the previous government was looking at, but somehow establishing an EPA and working out what they think the role of the commonwealth government is in that. That is later on. That is a new addition that we need to take into it.

With this 12-month review there are additional resources for the EPA, recognising the growth of our city and the growth of the environmental challenges that we are facing, and then having a good, hard look within the policy agency, within us, to see that we have a modern act that is responsive to a growing city and climate change, and then looking at how our EPA will have any further interactions with the federal government.

MR BRADDOCK: What are you hoping to achieve? You were describing a modern act and policies and so forth. I am trying to understand: what is the delta between where we are currently and where we need to be?

Mr Rutledge: That is what the review will highlight. I think it is clear that the EPA—and you would have heard that earlier this week—is spending a lot of time doing pollution control, a lot of time doing noise pollution control and water. I think what we have seen through the commissioner for the environment report is that we could do better in water. As I said, climate change is not well recognised in our current act. Those

are two key things. Also, I think the community expects greater transparency. I think we do transparency well, but we have not embedded transparency into the act. Those are three quick things. Obviously, we are in the early days of the review and over the coming months we will find out what that delta is. It is right to systemically review the foundation legislation, and that is what Minister Cheyne has asked us to do.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

DR PATERSON: I am just wondering if you can provide an update on the Capital Food and Fibre Strategy.

Ms Vassarotti: Absolutely. Thank you for the question, Dr Paterson. This is a strategy that I am really excited about because I think that, after two decades of us not really looking at agriculture in a deep sense, this is a really good opportunity to look at what the opportunities are to support local food and fibre production. It has been a really exciting process.

In relation to where we are at, we did release a discussion paper towards the end of last year that outlined our proposed vision and some of the key actions that we thought might have opportunities to flourish. In that, we are also looking at how we can ensure that our food production systems are sustainable and diverse and are really dealing with the issues of climate change. We really want to focus on ensuring that the community does have access to local food. There is some access, but we think that there are probably many more opportunities. We are looking at what the economic opportunities are in relation to local production and manufacture. They were some of the key elements.

We had a fantastic response to the discussion paper. While 15 per cent of our land mass is able to be used for agricultural purposes, we had a really significant uptake by people excited about the strategy. We have taken all of that feedback. There was a listening report, which has been provided on the YourSay website, and now we are doing the hard work of developing a draft strategy and working with our government colleagues in addressing some of the key issues.

They are some big issues in looking at how we might support more local food production. There are some big issues to look at in terms of access to land, how we deal with water, how we ensure inclusivity in this work, how we plan for our suburbs and how we ensure that there is access to space. There are many issues for us to work through, but that process is happening right now. We hope to have a draft strategy out in the coming months that we will test with our local community, and then we will move to a final strategy, probably in the early part of 2023.

One of the really interesting opportunities in relation to this, as we look at urban agriculture, is how we ensure that this is a really inclusive activity. As our city densifies, green space and access to nature become even more important, so it is about how we can really embed this activity as part of a city that is changing and evolving, particularly if some people have not got the same access to the traditional backyard. There is some great work already happening. We have got urban farmers who are working with people in their backyards. We have fantastic community gardens. This is a real opportunity for us to do much more local food production and to see how it can deliver not only economic benefits but also social benefits.

DR PATERSON: Will the strategy include ongoing monitoring of how much local produce Canberrans consume and produce, but also how that may reduce our scope 3 emissions?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. They are really good questions. We actually do not have a really good handle on even how much food production happens in the territory right now. There is some work that the University of Canberra did some time ago, but we do not do that on an ongoing basis. I think that is a really key issue that we need to pick up.

Looking at the impact around scope 3 emissions, I was very grateful for the work that the commissioner for the environment did in relation to scope 3 emissions. It was not set up at all, but the two case studies that she chose were the issues of agriculture and building, which was fantastic, because it gives us a really good basis to look at in two of my portfolio areas. I think the issue of scope 3 is a really important element of this discussion, as part of our broader discussion about climate change. Absolutely, things are in the mix in terms of what we need to think about around the draft strategy.

DR PATERSON: Thank you.

MS LAWDER: In budget statements E, page 6, it talks about the ACT's threatened species strategy. When will that be publicly available?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for the question. The issue of the management of threatened species is something that we really do care about. In relation to the specific strategy, I will look to our officials to provide information about the details around time frames. Threatened species action plans sit under the Nature Conservation Act and the Nature Conservation Strategy. We are quite focused at the moment on the earliest planning around the refreshed Nature Conservation Strategy, which is due in 2023. The threatened species action plans sit under that. I might look to the officials.

Mr Rutledge: Thanks, Minister. Ms Lawder, we highlighted that in the budget because that is work we are going to commence this financial year. It is not new work; it is a revision of that. It will take at least 12 months—at least the full financial year—and, as the minister said, we will wrap it up in the next calendar year.

MS LAWDER: As a strategy, will it include KPIs or time frames for recommendations or will it have recommendations? What form will this strategy take?

Mr Rutledge: It will have some actions and some KPIs, Ms Lawder. With threatened species there is a lot of science that we are already doing and there is a lot of monitoring that we are doing around that. We report on that through our accountability indicators. It is early days. I do not really want to commit to what form it will end up in. Maybe it is one that we will talk about next time we meet.

Ms Vassarotti: I further note that currently, under the Nature Conservation Act, we have 53 ACT species and three ecological communities that are listed as threatened, so that is quite significant, with another seven species with special protection status because they are listed under the EPBC Act. This means that we have got quite a significant task in terms of the work that we are doing across all of those species. I think

this is an area where we should feel really proud, as a community, of the work that is being done, whether it be the work on the gang-gang cockatoo, where we are leading national work, or the work around the earless dragon and the golden sun moth. There is really significant work that is happening that is covered under particular action plans. We will pull it together under the broader strategy.

MS LAWDER: Will there be any public consultation or is it developed in-house by the directorate?

Mr Rutledge: Ms Lawder, we have not worked that out. With all of our work, we will consult with stakeholders. When we are dealing with something like threatened species, there is small community of practice, if you will, in the community. Whether or not we go for broader consultation or just narrow stakeholder consultation, we have not yet decided, but I think it will be something like that. I suppose it is more technical than scientific, so we will probably just do stakeholder consultation. We will be public along the way. That is the mix that we will pull together.

MS LAWDER: Thanks. I would like to ask about the impacts of sambar deer. We have heard about them quite a bit, in the forest and the Cotter catchment area. There was an ACT government report from October 2017 which recommended that surveys be undertaken at all sites once every four years. When was the most recent survey undertaken? Are you able to table a copy of it for the committee?

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks, Ms Lawder, for the question. I will look to officials to provide some information on the surveying. Certainly, there is management of animals, including sambar deer, and that did occur in May 2022, particularly through a thermally assisted aerial shooting program. In terms of the surveying, I will ask for details.

Mr Rutledge: I will start where you ended and then I will ask Dr Cooney if she recalls the most recent survey. We spoke a little bit about this yesterday, but through the thermally assisted aerial culling—I know Dr Paterson had a question yesterday about it—we picked up 64 sambar deer in Namadgi. That was alongside 135 fallow deer, 31 goats and 271 pigs. As I was explaining at yesterday's hearing, the thermal imaging is a really efficient and effective management tool. We have seen since the bushfires, as I said yesterday, recent incursions and greater growth in the number of deer.

While we are on that topic, we spoke earlier about the area treated to reduce risk from invasive species, and we all know that the number was a bit low. I have gone back to the team and found that, actually, our aerial management program was not included in that number. That was our estimated outcome. With the inclusion of aerial culling, that number will probably come very close to target. We had not included that number at the time that we did the estimated outcome.

Dr Cooney: We carried out a research project integrated with the PCS control of sambar deer. That work was done in 2020, using drones and cameras, both to understand the impacts in certain areas of Namadgi and to get a grip on the actual numbers of sambar deer. We will be doing a post control further review and analysis of that data in the coming season. The relevant staff member is on maternity leave at the moment, but that work will be completed when she is back.

DR PATERSON: On the feral pigs, that is a lot of pigs. Is there any indication of what proportion of the population that is? Is the population of pigs quite large in Namadgi?

Mr Rutledge: That number is quite large, but, because of the timing of the season, some of those would have been sows with eight piglets, and that kind of stuff. It would have been just at post-breeding time. I would imagine that that would—not artificially inflate—absolutely recognise why we needed to do the culling at that time.

DR PATERSON: I know we have talked about how expensive the fertility treatment, the vaccine, is, but is there any thought given to other kinds of culling measures for pigs, control measures?

Mr Rutledge: Not for pigs. Interestingly, in the US GonaCon is used a lot with deer, but, as we were talking about, the use of GonaCon works in controlled areas. Our deer are in vast, expansive places, so at the moment shooting is the most effective way. For pigs we have used baiting in the past, but, as I was saying yesterday and again today, the thermally assisted aerial culling seems to be the most effective and efficient way at this time.

Mr Burkevics: Dr Paterson, further to Mr Rutledge's remarks, trapping is another effective measure for control in Namadgi. Certainly, our relationship with the rural lessees and the close liaison we have with the farmers and rural lessees is really important. It is a cohesive and united approach to pig control. But, as Mr Rutledge indicated, we have had great success from the thermally assisted aerial shooting program, with a high number of pigs removed from some very, very sensitive areas across Namadgi and other parks.

Ms Vassarotti: The other comment I might make about pigs is the importance of managing pigs, not just in relation to the impact on the natural environment but also because of the potential risk to biosecurity, particularly some of the threats that we have seen around things like Japanese encephalitis. We know that transmission through pigs is an issue. It is one that we want to manage and manage well, absolutely, because of the impact on the natural environment, which is really significant. You see the impact of feral pigs on the natural landscape and it is like a four-wheel drive has gone through during the wet season. It is pretty horrendous. There are additional issues that we are starting to face with some of these populations as well.

MS LAWDER: Going back to deer, but it may also apply to pigs: do we still have these semi or partial exclusion plots? It is in the report from 2017.

Mr Rutledge: I will look into that, Ms Lawder. I am not familiar with that.

MS LAWDER: And, if we still have these partial exclusion plots, are they routinely maintained to ensure that they are still exclusion plots?

Mr Rutledge: Again, we have strayed into operational areas, but I am happy to take it on notice and get back to you with some information.

MS LAWDER: Thank you. I will put the rest on notice. They are a bit more technical.

Mr Rutledge: Okay. Thanks, Ms Lawder. I appreciate that.

MR BRADDOCK: My colleague Ms Clay had a motion passed on animal-friendly netting. I would like to ask how work on that is progressing.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you very much for the question, Mr Braddock. The issue of animal-friendly netting is a really important one. We really welcomed the motion that was moved in the Assembly by Ms Clay. In fact, this was an issue that we were talking about only this week, in terms of what the progress is. We are working on some legislative reform in this area, but we also see that there is a real opportunity to work with organisations to incentivise and proactively work with people who might be using netting that is having an impact, particularly on bats. I might look to Mr Burkevics to provide a bit more detail.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister. It is a really important initiative this one, to protect bats. If I am not mistaken, ACT Wildlife reported approximately 77 bats in previous years that were caught in netting that was not friendly. As the minister indicated, we are working within government to progress some legislative reform options on that. At the same time, I am very keen to look at some practical measures that we can deploy very, very soon, including with the assistance of our stakeholders and partner agencies.

We will look at education campaigns. I am advised that a common area for entrapment is nets over fig trees, so we are potentially looking at options for further education for fig tree owners on selecting and choosing the right nets and any opportunities we have through relevant and appropriate grant programs that potentially could provide a net swap-out program. We are looking at all options to move as quickly as we can to protect bats and remove that netting that is less than ideal.

MR BRADDOCK: Can you tell me what the ACT Biodiversity Conservation Forum has been up to and have there been any outcomes yet from that forum?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. Thank you very much for your question. The Biodiversity Conservation Forum is a really important forum. It has provided us with a great opportunity to bring key stakeholders together with government to discuss issues such as weeds, as we were talking about, and invasive species. They have been engaging in some of the consultation around things such as the planning review.

That group has been operating for 12 months now and is doing a bit of reflection on its terms of reference and what it will be doing, moving forward. I found it a really useful forum to be able to engage with a group of stakeholders, as well as talking to people one on one, bringing a range of perspectives together. In terms of informing my work, it has been particularly useful. I also know that, from the directorate's point of view, it has been a really useful forum to provide information, to get feedback and to hear a range of particular views. I will look to the co-chair to provide some further details.

Mr Burkevics: Thanks, Minister. It is my absolute pleasure to co-chair, with the executive director of the Conservation Council ACT, the BCF. It is a truly wonderful initiative to bring together government and environmental volunteers and other environmental groups to discuss areas of common interest and work together. There are a number of measures that we are putting into place. At the last meeting we were

working on a joint charter that I think will further strengthen how the body works together. The group was briefed on the habitat matting announcement of government and we continue to look at a number of invasive pest animal matters. Those that have come up today have also been raised as part of that forum. I sense that the forum will be an absolutely terrific opportunity to ensure effective and organised communication flows, joint initiatives and the development of partnership opportunities to protect, preserve and enhance biodiversity.

MR BRADDOCK: Fantastic. Last question, I promise. The planning system review is a big piece of work that is going on at the moment. I am really interested in the environmental intersection of that, particularly with the Nature Conservation Act. I am interested in how that work is coherent or joined up, let's say.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you very much, Mr Braddock, for the question. I think you are right that, certainly in my role as Minister for the Environment, I have been really conscious of the impact of the planning system on our natural environment. How it intersects with acts such as the Nature Conservation Act and other acts is really important. I can confirm that I have been engaging really closely, working with stakeholders who have been engaged in the public consultation phase on the environmental impacts of the planning review.

There has been some really good conversation around the intersection and a really good investigation of what the options are, and what happens in other jurisdictions. We are keeping a keen eye on it, to ensure that the planning review does not erode environmental protections and, in fact, works to preserve environmental protections, because we recognise that in a city such as ours that is evolving, our status as the bush capital and the importance of our natural environment is really, really key.

An initiative that we got funded this year is the connectivity work, the Connecting People, Connecting Nature initiative, which is looking at mapping some of the connectivity corridors and identifying where there are gaps in those connectivity corridors. As part of the contribution to the planning review, there is a member of that team that is now embedded in the planning review team to ensure that that connectivity mapping is being considered in the development of some of the tools, including district planning. Do you have anything to add, Mr Ponton?

Mr Ponton: The only thing I would add, if I could, Minister, is that I guess we are fortunate in the way that the public service has been set up, in that not only am I leading the planning review as director-general of the directorate but also I am leading this other work that the minister has just been talking about—the connectivity mapping and all of the other work that we have been talking about today, both work that has been undertaken and work that we plan to do this coming year.

I have been very conscious, as director-general, of making sure that we can integrate all of that work, because, as the minister said, a key way to deliver on a lot of this is through the planning system. I am sure you have been through the bill. Compared to the current planning act, the planning bill has gone a lot further, I would suggest, than any other jurisdiction in trying to integrate planning, the environment, consideration of climate change and a range of other matters, and particularly in relation to the planning system also considering a raft of other government policies—transport and the like.

That has been a key driver of this work, to make sure that, once we get to on-block consideration, having gone through the metropolitan district spatial planning exercises, we have considered all of those government policies. The current system does not allow us to do that, so this is a great opportunity for us.

Mr Rutledge: Chair, if I may, I can provide answers to a couple of things so that the information is with the committee earlier. In response to Ms Lawder's questions, I have now done the computation: 674 joeys were involved in this year's management program. The blunt instrument would otherwise be described as a wooden mallet or similar. To Dr Paterson, when we are using GonaCon, anaesthesia and injection by hand is about \$100 per roo and through dart delivery it is about \$60 per roo. There is still a large gap between that and other normal culling methods. I thought I would cover those off for the committee.

THE CHAIR: Okay. On that note, we draw this session to a close. The committee would like to thank Minister Vassarotti and officials for your attendance today. Naturally, if there are any questions taken on notice, could you provide answers to the committee secretary within five working days. The committee will now suspend and reconvene at 11.15.

Hearing suspended from 10.49 to 11.15 am.

THE CHAIR: In this session, we will hear from Ms Vassarotti, Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction, and officials. Welcome. Before we start, there are a few housekeeping matters I wish to draw your attention to. Mobile phones are to be switched off or put on silent mode. Please respect the stated room limits and physical distancing requirements that are in place in this building as part of the Legislative Assembly's COVID-safe measures. Please allow the cleaner to clean the desks and seats between witnesses. Please practice good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Witnesses are to speak one at a time and will need to speak directly into the microphone for Hansard to be able to hear and transcribe them accurately. The first time witnesses speak, they will need to mention their names and the capacity in which they appear. Witnesses appearing remotely will need to state their names and the capacity in which they appear the first time they speak, and then their names for any subsequent times they speak. 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 the words, "I will take that as a question on notice". This will help the committee to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

I also remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege, and draw your attention to that privilege statement. The first time you speak, please mention your name and the capacity in which you appear, and confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement. The committee has been provided with an opening statement for the record. Thank you, Minister Vassarotti.

MR PARTON: Can we start with the building levy fund. How much revenue has the building levy generated in the recent financial year 2021-22 compared to the previous

financial year 2020-21?

Ms Vassarotti: That is a question that sits outside my portfolio. It is an Access Canberra question.

MR PARTON: Right; okay.

Ms Vassarotti: I am just seeing if we have officials that might be able to—

Mr Ponton: We do have Mr Lhuede online.

Mr Lhuede: Yes, thank you and good morning. I have read and I do understand the privilege statement. Thank you, Mr Parton. I will take that question on notice.

MR PARTON: So given that this levy, although, obviously, it has impact in the particular portfolio space that we are discussing, but technically sits outside of it in Access Canberra—

Ms Vassarotti: My understanding is that the levy is a way of supporting the compliance and operational elements of the work that sits within Access Canberra. So my responsibilities are around setting the policy and standards; Access Canberra is around compliance. That is where the split is.

MR PARTON: Okay.

Ms Vassarotti: But certainly, in terms of supporting that work, I work closely with Minister Cheyne. Obviously, we want to see government have the capacity to operationalise and undertake compliance activities, but it sits within her admin arrangements.

MR PARTON: Ultimately, Chair, it is your call whether that was a substantive question or not. I am happy to just pass the ball on.

THE CHAIR: Well, I would class that as a substantive.

MR PARTON: So would I, probably.

MR BRADDOCK: Nice try! With respect to the new seven-star energy rating requirements, I just wanted to understand what the pathway is to be able to achieve that here in the ACT?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Braddock, for the question. As you noted, the building ministers came together last week, and we did endorse changes to the National Construction Code, which will see the mandating of a seven-star energy rating for new residential homes. The decision that was made is that while the new construction code will be published this October, that element of the construction code will need to be complied with in a mandatory sense from October 2023.

The industry has been working for many years in relation to the star rating system, and we have had in place a mandatory requirement for six stars. That has been operating for

over a decade. The thing about the star rating system is that it provides builders and designers with the opportunity to choose a range of different mechanisms to reach that star rating. There are a range of things in terms of building design. Orientation is king in terms of providing support to get to a really good energy rating accreditation, but there are significant things that people can look at in terms of where they place windows. Building products is a really significant issue that impacts it, and they can make decisions such as insulating slabs.

There is a range of things that people can choose, in terms of design as well as products, in order to reach the mandatory seven stars. Certainly, in a climate like Canberra's, achieving a seven-star rating will mean that we will have homes that are actually comfortable and easier and much cheaper to run over the lifetime of the building. Certainly, I have been on the record as saying that this is a fairly minimal requirement at this point.

Now that the decision has been made by building ministers—and I think the fact that it has been made nationally is really good for industry—it provides consistency, and it means that there will be a range of supports from the Australian Building Codes Board, in terms of providing information to industry about the requirements. Significant work has already gone into developing communications and information packages, but certainly here in the ACT we have already started the discussion with industry around the support that they need to transition to this new requirement. There is a range of implementation issues that will be worked through, and that is why we have the 12-month gap between the decision and publication, and the implementation of standards.

MR BRADDOCK: With it applying from October 2023, will that apply to any building that starts construction after that date or halfway through construction?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. That is a really good question. In fact, it was one of the discussion points that we were having with members of the industry just before the decision. I might just go to Mr Bennett up the back, who will be leading the implementation work, because some of those implementation issues are things that we are working through right now around the issue of the point of development application, the point of building application and when the cut-off starts. Those are key implementation issues that the team is looking into right now. Mr Bennett, is there anything more you would like to add?

Mr Bennett: Thank you, Minister. After the decision at BMM last week, we have been commencing our planning through the implementation of those changes. One of the key issues, as the minister mentioned, was how we transition from our current rules to the new rules for those applications and developments which are in the development application process at the moment, and potentially have development approval, and those which have either received building approval or are in the process of applying for building approval.

At the moment we are about to commence the conversations with industry. We have had conversations, already, about needing to provide clarity about those applications, and we are really conscious of enabling a fast but fair transition here. For those developments which are proceeding down the construction pathway—which already have approvals in place—we will be looking closely at what is fair in terms of which

requirements they will need to meet if they already have development approval in place. That is something that we are very focused on. We need to have conversations to really nail down exactly what the trigger points are about what building code requirements will apply to those developments.

Ms Vassarotti: The one final comment that I would make is that, while these requirements will be mandatory by October next year, people are absolutely able to meet these requirements on a voluntary basis from the point of publication. This is a real opportunity for community and for consumers to look at what they are looking for in terms of building homes that will be standing for decades to come. It is a conversation that we would really encourage consumers to have with their building designers and their builders, in terms of what things can be done to ensure that they have a home that is climate wise, is comfortable and saves them money in the long term.

THE CHAIR: Mr Bennett, you will just need to say that you have read and understood the privilege statement.

Mr Bennett: My apologies. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. My follow-up question is about the silver accessibility standards. Is this going to be all part of the one package?

Ms Vassarotti: Absolutely. They will also be a mandatory requirement from October next year. The decision around the silver standard liveability standards was actually made in April last year, so there has been a long lead-up time in terms of industry understanding what the requirements are. There has been some discussion, but that has primarily been around exemptions and what is in and out. Again, the industry has been working with these voluntary standards for over a decade so, as Mr Bennett said, we want to support a fast but fair transition.

It is really interesting to see, across jurisdictions, a real recognition of the need for these accessibility standards around the dignity of people in terms of ensuring that our homes, that will be standing for many decades to come, remain able to meet our needs as we age. So this is a really significant change that has been made. We want to support the industry to do it, but, again, it is around supporting everyone to build homes that we know work for us now and into the future.

MR PARTON: These are obviously national reforms and, in a small part—you might say a large part—they have been driven by this jurisdiction, but can I just ask about the considerations and the modelling that has been done on a national basis on the possible effect on the final cost of home building. What effect are these reforms going to have on the price of products when they get to the market?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for the question, Mr Parton. There has been significant work done. There was a consultation regulatory impact statement, as well as a decision impact statement, that was released, particularly on the energy standards—I think that came out with the decision last week—so significant modelling has been done. It was really interesting. Particularly on the accessibility standards, there was a concern that some of the costings did not take into account some of the broader positive impacts in terms of a move to these changes.

The other really interesting thing—and I think it is the important thing—with these changes happening at a national level, is that this will drive a new standard. In terms of some of the cost impacts, they are likely to reduce quite significantly as particular sizes and types of windows et cetera become the standard, whereas they are not the standard at the moment. So we do expect costs to decrease over time as those become the standard. I think there are real concerns in the community around the issue of housing affordability, but when we look at the drivers of housing affordability, these kinds of changes are not the things that are driving 30 per cent increases in the price of housing; there are other things at play.

MR PARTON: Minister, given that you have indicated that this document about the effect of the changes says that there will be cost impacts, is it a sensible conclusion to reach that whatever cost impact there is, it will impact housing affordability?

Ms Vassarotti: Not necessarily.

MR PARTON: Well, of course it will, Minister.

Ms Vassarotti: In something like energy efficiency, it is about looking at costs over time. This will actually save people money over the lifetime. In some cases, there may be a modest increase in terms of some elements of products, and that might change over time, particularly as volumes increase; but certainly around energy efficiency, you will be saving significant amounts of money over time. The regulatory impact statements have been modelled; they have provided information at a jurisdictional level. They are clear and in the public domain, and were a key element of the decision that was made by building ministers. This will not be a significant driver. When you look at the drivers of housing affordability over a period of time, and you look at the regulatory impact statements, we are not going to see huge increases due to these changes.

MR PARTON: Thank you, Minister.

DR PATERSON: Minister, my question is in relation to the Master Builders Fidelity Fund. I was just wondering, in the past financial year, how many claims were made against that fund?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Dr Paterson, for the question. The fidelity fund is something that is managed by the Master Builders Association. I do not have the information to hand about how many claims are made against the fund. I will look to officials to see if we do have that information.

Mr Bennett: Thank you for that question. The Master Builders Fidelity Fund is not a government-run fund. The fidelity fund is required under the Building Act and the scheme that has set up and approved the fidelity fund. They are required to provide reports to government, but because the fidelity fund is set up in competition with the residential building insurance industry, there is some sensitivity about providing information about claims and the amount paid out for claims. I do not think that we have released that information publicly in the past, but it is provided by the fund to government.

DR PATERSON: In terms of the government's understanding of the claims that are made through that fund, in balance with the salary costs and expenses that are applied by the Master Builders Association to manage that fund, do you believe it has been adequately managed?

Ms Vassarotti: In relation to the fidelity fund, there are government arrangements put around that. I have actually indicated that we will be doing a review into how it is operating. This was an issue that was looked at in the inquiry into building quality in the Ninth Assembly, and there were some recommendations in relation to the fidelity fund. It is my view that it is time to have a look at how the fidelity fund is operating. That is something that the Master Builders Association Fidelity Fund has welcomed.

In relation to the issues that we will be looking at, it will be around the current application and approval processes of the fidelity fund schemes. We will be looking at insurance settings and particularly looking at a potential increase in the minimum prescribed insurance amount. That is something that was picked up in the inquiry report. We want to have an understanding of whether we need to look at clarifying the legislation. There have been some issues that have come up in terms of claims in common areas. That is an area that the fidelity fund has struggled to deal with in a couple of claims. They have identified a way to manage it, but we think that there might be an opportunity to provide clarity through the legislation.

We want to have a look at how things are operating in other jurisdictions. The fidelity fund was set up at a particular point in time when we saw the insurance industry collapse, primarily, and we wanted to make sure that there was an insurer of last resort. Things have changed a little bit, and we wanted to have a look at some of the tools and instruments that sit underneath the fund. So we do think that it is time to have a look at it. It is something that has been supported by the MBA and the fidelity fund itself. We are looking for that to be completed by mid-2023.

DR PATERSON: Is the Master Builders Fidelity Fund held to the same levels of accountability and regulation as other insurance agencies are?

Ms Vassarotti: I am just trying to look at the act that it is subject to. It is absolutely subject to a range of requirements. It is the Building Act. I will go to officials to provide details of the acts under which it sits and the obligations.

Mr Bennett: As I mentioned earlier, the fidelity fund is approved under the Building Act. It is a fund that operates under a trust deed and, as part of the review that the minister has mentioned, we will be looking at the trust deed, and the terms of that trust deed. As I mentioned earlier, this is a wholly private sector commercial business that has been set up to compete with the insurance industry and, because it is set up to compete with the insurance industry, we also appreciate that, while it is not an insurance scheme and it is not subject to the Insurance Act and other insurance laws, it does need to have those appropriate financial and prudential standards in place.

The operation of approval of fidelity fund schemes under the Building Act, and the requirement for a trust deed, puts in place those financial and prudential standards to make sure that they are operating in an appropriate manner, and that there is also the appropriate reporting back to the minister on the operation of the scheme and that they

need to provide audited reports and that sort of information. So there is that oversight of the way that the fidelity fund scheme operates, and they do need to comply with similar requirements to what the insurance agencies need to comply with.

DR PATERSON: This is my final supplementary question. One of the issues raised with me is around the sole remaining inaugural trustee, who is on the board of the Master Builders Fidelity Fund, is also on the board of the Master Builders Skills Centre Building Fund Board and is also the Master Builders Fidelity Fund legal representative. It is my understanding that under the law you have to declare conflicts of interest or potential conflicts of interest. Is that trustee's engagement in all those different roles a clear conflict of interest?

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks for the question. I will look to officials. Certainly, in terms of the deed, there is a requirement for the fidelity fund to have policies and procedures around issues such as conflict of interest. I understand that, in terms of looking at the deed, these are issues that have been discussed with the fidelity fund, but I will look to officials.

Mr Bennett: I do not have much further to add in relation to the individual person you are talking about, but, as the minister mentioned, we would expect that there is appropriate management of conflict of interest. All matters under the trust deed are things we will look at as part of the review process that we are going through. That is something that we can take a look into and include as part of our review.

DR PATERSON: Would it not be a little bit more urgent to seek that information—given that under the law you need, under the deed, to disclose conflicts of interest—rather than wait until another year for a review recommendation?

Ms Vassarotti: My understanding was that officials were checking on issues such as conflict of interest policies and the implementation of those policies. It is something that we can double-check, but my understanding is that that is in process.

DR PATERSON: Thank you.

MR PARTON: Can we stop on that, briefly? I am just a little confused because we have heard—in this line of questioning from Dr Paterson—the minister and Mr Bennett distance themselves completely from the MBFF by saying that it is a private operation, that it is doing its own thing and that it is competing with all the other insurance companies. It has been described in this hearing, in the past 10 minutes, as pretty much just a private company. But, on the other hand, we heard the minister talk about changes that she wants to implement in the way that the MBFF operates in regard to this review. I am just trying to get clarification. If it is operating as a private company, how is it that the government can intervene, and what actual role does the government play in the Master Builders Fidelity Fund?

Ms Vassarotti: The fidelity fund is constituted by a trust that sits under the Building Act. So we do have a role, particularly around oversight. We want to make sure that the fidelity fund is operating. We are working with the fidelity fund to ensure that they have the appropriate instruments in place. In essence, that is what the role is. It absolutely operates as an independent authority, but we do provide some oversight. Again, I will

look to officials in terms of additional clarification around that question.

Mr Bennett: Thank you. The way that the fidelity fund scheme has been established is obviously, as I mentioned earlier, to be in competition with the residential building insurance industry. There is regulation that applies to insurance agencies, insurance companies, under insurance legislation. Under the Building Act, there is a need to have either a residential building insurance policy or, if you cannot achieve that or want to go down a different path, there is the opportunity to have a fidelity fund certificate issued by an approved fidelity fund scheme. Either of those pathways is available.

Under the Building Act, the process for establishing fidelity fund schemes and their operating environment is set and established through the Building Act. The fidelity fund scheme itself is run as a private company, but the oversight and the accountability are established through the Building Act, with a reporting line back to the minister on that to ensure that there is appropriate oversight of how the scheme is operating, to be similar to what an insurance agency would need to do under insurance law.

DR PATERSON: Is there any specification in the legislation that X amount of dollars goes to the skills development program that sits underneath the Master Builders Fidelity Fund?

Mr Bennett: I do not know that detail, so I will have to check on that and come back to you.

Ms Vassarotti: We can take that question on notice. There certainly have been some funds from the fidelity fund that have gone to the training agency, but we will take that question on notice.

DR PATERSON: I would like to know what percentage goes each year.

MR PARTON: I would like to ask a really broad policy question in regard to engineer registration in this jurisdiction and exactly where we are at, what the time line is going to be, and what the outcomes will be. That is like a dixer, really, isn't it?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes; that is a great question, Mr Parton! You would probably have noticed that it was last week when we put out, via the YourSay website, a discussion paper on engineer registration. This is an issue that has been discussed for some time within the jurisdiction. Up to this point, we have had really productive and good conversations with industry about how a registration scheme might work in the ACT. Engineer registration is a really interesting process in terms of the fact that, while we want to get harmonisation across jurisdictions, this is an area where really different approaches happen across different jurisdictions. The Queensland model has a very broad approach; the New South Wales system has a very narrow approach; and the Victorian system kind of sits halfway between.

Until the release of the discussion paper, there was a lot of conversation with the jurisdictions, as well as with professional bodies, in terms of what might work. This is a really nice area, but it is an area in which industry are saying that they would like to be regulated. They see it as a really positive thing for their industry. We have released a discussion paper. It is a relatively short period for the discussion paper; I think it is

four weeks. That was in recognition of the fact that there has been a lot of consultation. It is a technical area, and we wanted to move quite quickly, so our intention is that we will have legislation ready to be introduced into the Assembly this side of Christmas.

MR PARTON: Excellent. It does seem as though just about everybody is on the same page, doesn't it?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. This is a priority activity for me. We want to move very quickly after we get the responses from consultation. Obviously, it is meaningful consultation; we will absolutely take on board the feedback. We are quite hopeful that we can move quite quickly and want to get it into the Assembly as quickly as possible.

MR PARTON: Thanks. I look forward to seeing the legislation.

Ms Vassarotti: Fantastic.

MR PARTON: This question is quite broad, Minister. I just want to know how much is appropriated in the recent budget for building quality reform activities.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for that question. I might need to look to officials to answer that question. In terms of the appropriation, a lot of the initiatives that we are working on are long-term, broad initiatives that we have had funding allocations for in previous budgets, and that are rolling through. In terms of the actual numbers, I will look to my colleagues to answer.

In terms of the reform agenda, significant work is happening in this area. Engineer registration obviously is a key one that we have been working on. We continue to work on projects, including property developer regulation and government certifiers. A lot of work has been happening in the team in terms of supporting the automatic mutual recognition work. But, in terms of the figures—

MR PARTON: Mr Ponton, what I am looking for specifically is what the funding will actually pay for, how many people is that going to employ, and what area are those people going to be employed in?

Mr Ponton: I have read and understood the privilege statement. In relation to the way the funding is established, there are two components. There is initiative funding, of course, and then there is our base funding. In terms of reforms, a lot of reform work is building on previous work that we have done. Of course, we had the report that was done a number of years ago. I think there were 43 reforms that were implemented as a result of that work. Then there was the *Building confidence* report, which was a national report. That has essentially been done within our existing resources—that is, the funding that is provided to the directorate by government for that team.

Shortly, I might go to Mr Bennett who can run you through the team structure and talk to you about the people involved in the various components of this work. Separate to that is the initiative funding, which is over and above that work—things such as developer licensing, which was a separate initiative, and also private certification, which is a separate budget initiative. In respect of the exact figures in terms of what is remaining, I do not have that at hand. If Mr Bennett does, he might be able to share that

with you; otherwise, we may have to take that on notice. Hopefully he has that all at hand.

MR PARTON: We usually trust Mr Bennett. I mean, we always trust Mr Bennett!

Mr Bennett: Thank you. As the minister and Ben alluded to, there are several initiatives in the building reform space which have been funded in recent budgets, which are ongoing initiatives. Also, there are a couple of initiatives that still have money that has been rolled over into the 2022-23 budget for work that we are working on. In some of the initiatives that there is remaining funding for in 2022-23, we have money available as part of an initiative called “Better services in your community”, which looks into reviewing the ACT energy rating disclosure scheme. We have about \$200,000 left in that line item to progress some work this year to engage a consultant to do some of that work for us in some of the technical aspects of reviewing that disclosure scheme.

We also have money available under a previous initiative for engineer registration and some of that early planning work. The money that we have from a previously funded initiative that is still available for this year is being used to pay for a senior officer to progress the work that the minister talked to earlier, around a discussion paper about the elements of that proposed registration scheme and then take us forward through the consultation process into developing legislation.

We also have funding for progressing reforms around stage 2 building reforms and developer licensing. That is a previously funded initiative, where we still have some money available. We are continuing to progress work on exploring opportunities for developer regulation, and we will continue that over this financial year. There are also two other initiatives which were in previous budgets, which have money available in 2022-23. There is the building quality improvement initiative, and that money is being used for some staff and also for some consultancies to progress a broader reform program related to building quality.

I guess that the most significant line item is an initiative called building regulation reform. For 2022-23 there is over \$700,000 available, and that is being used for positions and also to engage some advice to progress a number of projects which we have as part of our broad building policy reform program, to make sure that, where we have ongoing reforms, and as matters come up, we have resources to deal with them, but also to continue to progress previously announced reforms, some of which we have talked about today.

MR PARTON: Excellent response. Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: There was \$2.2 million for the strengthening building quality regulation announced in this budget. What exactly is that purchasing?

Mr Bennett: That might be a question for Nick, on the screen.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. I think that is a Nick question. It is around compliance. I think that the brief is compliance activity, and it will go to Access Canberra.

Mr Lhuede: Yes, that is correct, Mr Parton. It flows on very well from the earlier

response, so thank you for that opportunity. Yes, the additional funding of \$2.034 million in the 2022-23 budget is to further enhance the safety and protection of homeowners through improved building quality by improving our technical expertise, resourcing and systems capability as the regulator.

So what that additional funding is providing us is to further build on the previous two to three years of additional funding within the building regulation space to provide us additional inspectors. Again, the focus is on trying to get earlier intervention into building quality issues and compliance. We have also staff increases to further focus on our proactive audit teams. So, in addition to the three new inspectors that will go into our reactive team, we also have an additional engineer who will provide further support, and they will sit within our proactive [... indistinct ...] team.

Really important in this budget initiative as well—as we have built this capability over the past couple of years—is to provide some of that back-end support as well. So that will include the back-end systems and IT improvement, just so we can collect the [... indistinct ...] data for better moving forward.

And the final really important element, while it is not reflected in the FTEs, is that there is additional funding for legal capability. As we have gone into more complex cases, and as we have been more proactive and assertive in our regulation, inevitably they do end up being challenged. We spend a bit of time in ACAT, and sometimes in higher courts, so we have provided some additional legal capability within Access Canberra. That has been really valuable to strengthen regulatory actions when we take them.

Just to finish off, as we have moved forward, a lot of the extra resources have been focused on dealing with complaints and building our proactive space. Where we are really trying to focus on in the coming years is to start looking at a holistic approach around our licensed entities, and using what are really effective mechanisms within COLA, the Construction Occupations Licensing Act, around managing licensed entities and occupational discipline. So that is another area of focus that this funding will be contributing towards.

MR BRADDOCK: All these packages are really good in terms of new builds. I suppose what I am thinking about is the existing stock that we have here in Canberra. What is available for Canberrans who have been hit with issues of building quality?

Ms Vassarotti: Again, this strays into Access Canberra territory, but in terms of current buildings, there are statutory periods, particularly around things such as building disputes and defects and concerns in that area. That, again, would continue to sit under Access Canberra. Nick, I am not sure if you have anything to add in relation to things that are not being built right now?

Mr Lhuede: Thanks, Minister. That is a really good question. What we do have within the Construction Occupations (Licensing) Act is a 10-year [...indistinct...] act to ethically address builders. This touches upon some of the funding, where we have been successful around data and back-end systems. One of the projects we are looking at is a more targeted look at historical data, for example, in the class 2 design building space, which is primarily your multi-unit residential. We are able to look at the data associated with builders, developers, engineers, and previous complaints or rectification issues,

and start to use data to inform some of our steps. We can look back, and we are looking back, in a proactive sense at some repercussions at some building sites, for example. But also, as I said at the start, there is capacity for homeowners, where they have issues—and often those issues take some time to manifest—to raise those complaints with us, as the regulator, and we will inspect and investigate and take appropriate action.

MR BRADDOCK: This might be another Access Canberra question, and I apologise if it is. Is there an awareness-raising exercise that needs to be done in terms of making sure that homeowners and building owners are aware of those statutory periods?

Ms Vassarotti: I think the issue of education and community awareness more generally in the building space is a really important one. Independent of whether it is a new build or a build someone has had for some time, this is often the biggest purchase that a family will ever make, and it is a scary purchase. People sometimes feel that they do not have a lot of information about it, and quite a lot of work has been done around the directorate website—the Build, buy or renovate website. That is a process that is developed all the time in terms of ensuring that people have all of the information that they need to feel that they are an informed consumer.

In terms of some of the information about statutory time frames, I would probably look to Access Canberra; but before we do, I wonder if there is additional information that is worth providing in terms of that communications piece that we do to support people who are entering into these significant purchases or are in the process of building extensions, so that they have the information that they need to make informed choices in relation to that.

Mr Ponton: Minister, I would just add that that was the intention of the Build, buy or renovate website, and the marketing that went around that. It was very well received by the community. One of the key components of that was to include information regarding time frames and statutory warranties, so that is certainly available. As part of our ongoing review of communications and engagement within the directorate, we regularly look at and monitor the hits on those websites. If we need to do anything else to generate further interest or make sure that people are using those sources of information, we will certainly do that.

MR BRADDOCK: Okay, thank you.

DR PATERSON: Thank you. Minister, the CFMMEU recently conducted a survey where they reached nearly a thousand Canberrans, and one of the findings of that survey was that 77 per cent of Canberrans want property developers to demonstrate financial capacity to complete any proposed developments. There were similar findings, basically, around controls of standards and the power of property developers. I am just wondering what work is being done by the government to progress this work.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Dr Paterson, for the question. I really welcome the work that the union did in terms of that community survey. I think it was a really helpful contribution in terms of the discussion and where the community sat in relation to this issue. The government remains committed to looking at property developer regulation and particularly ensuring that there is accountability and transparency in terms of information, and that there are mechanisms to deal with issues from a regulatory

perspective. I will just go to Dr Brady in terms of the work.

In relation to this work, it is progressing. It is a complex piece of work. This is an issue that we have talked about in estimates before about some of the complexities in terms of corporations law and identifying the key things. You do not go to school to become a property developer; it is a bit different to a builder's licence, where you have a range of qualifications and things like that. We are working through some complex issues and working with jurisdictions such as Queensland. Queensland previously had a go at this and actually had to repeal the legislation.

In terms of time frames, we are not quite where I would have hoped in terms of the introduction of legislation, but we are working hard to ensure that we deliver on this reform. But, yes, this has been an area that has had some impact around COVID and staff changes, so I just wanted to put that on the table.

Dr Brady: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I think the minister has covered a lot of where we are at. As the minister noted, it is an area where we have, in the building reform team, had impacts from COVID and recruitment. We have felt that, and that has affected some of the work. Nonetheless, we have continued to have those discussions, as the minister said, with other jurisdictions who are looking at similar issues. One of the good things that has come out of the discussions we have been having and the research we have been doing—and, you noted, the CFMMEU feedback—is that, as the minister has said, it is transparency and accountability that is at the root of all of this. I think we have greater clarity on what we need to focus on, so our intention is that we would get to a discussion paper and, subject to government discussion, we would want to have some consultation on that. That is the direction that we are heading in, and we have some good input now from other jurisdictions who are having similar issues. But I think we are all at the same point. It is, as the minister said, transparency and accountability that are at the core of this.

THE CHAIR: I have questions on the asbestos task force. What is the status of the Asbestos Response Taskforce?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you very much, Mr Milligan, for the question. As you noted, we have transitioned from the task force—it closed on 30 June—to the Loose Fill Asbestos Coordination team that is now operating. From the public's point of view, there should not be any change in terms of the level of response and support that is provided to homeowners that are dealing with this issue. This has really been an issue of the change of scale and scope of the project. If we look at what our numbers are, on 10 August 2022, 1,008 of the known 1,029 residential properties that were identified as being affected by loose-fill asbestos insulation have been demolished. So it is the size of the task more than anything else.

We decided to close the task force and set up a smaller coordination team. It is responsible for delivering the remaining work on the management of properties in the ACT. In making this change, we wanted to make sure that we did not lose the significant expertise that we have developed within the government over the period of eight years that we have been dealing with this issue. I think we can be really proud of the level of support that has been provided to the community. This has been very difficult for every homeowner who has been in this situation. This is a frightening thing. It has had

financial impacts. It has meant that people have basically had to uproot their lives. I think that the work that we have done in supporting people—while we cannot minimise the ongoing impact—is something that we have learned a lot from, and we do hold expertise. I might ask Mr Green if there is any additional information that he would like to provide in terms of how the coordinating team is operating since it commenced at the beginning of July.

Mr Green: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I think the minister has covered it off, but I think it is an important point to make that we continue to work for the community. The minister has mentioned the numbers of affected properties that have been surrendered. The removal of Mr Fluffy asbestos was a key priority for government eight years ago and, by and large, that has been delivered.

We expect that there may be some properties identified since the closure of the scheme—there have been—and we want to make sure that we continue to provide that support for the community, going forward. The government has funded, for the next 18 months, a transition. As part of the work that we will do, with the seven staff that are funded through that budget initiative, we will look at how we transition to a more business-as-usual operating model, whether that sits continually within EPSDD or whether there are functions that transfer across government to other areas. That is a key piece of work that we will do.

Importantly, it has been a very long period to run a program of this nature—one that has impacted almost every single Canberran and others across the country and the world in terms of people having known of, visited or lived in a Mr Fluffy home. We are really committed to making sure that the next phase of work that we complete over this next 18 months sets up success, going forward, but also, as I mentioned, the ability for community to come back as needed.

THE CHAIR: What is the status of the Community and Expert Reference Group?

Ms Vassarotti: The Community and Expert Reference Group has also wrapped up its activities. It provided a really useful reflection report a little while ago. There are still some recommendations that we are working through around the task force. There is some ongoing support that is provided to private owners, particularly around health and wellbeing. But one of the key projects that was a recommendation of the Community and Expert Reference Group was to provide a point of reflection for people that have been impacted by this. This is something that was funded in this budget, and we will be working to implement it over the next few months to reflect on the impact of individuals and households. In recognition that this was a really significant thing that impacted our whole community, and continues to impact our whole community, it was important to commemorate that.

THE CHAIR: Is their report public that they have provided to the government, and their recommendations?

Ms Vassarotti: My understanding is that we are reporting. Is that right?

Mr Green: Yes, we are currently working on a broader closure report of the scheme, Given that it has run for eight years, it is important to reflect on that. The Community

and Expert Reference Group certainly contributed to the preparation of that.

The other element is looking at the lessons learned. I think that is a really important thing for government, not only for the territory government but for other entities that enter into long-term schemes of this nature—to understand what is learned and be able to provide that to others as they go along a similar or different journey, depending on the emergency-type of response they are in. The Community and Expert Reference Group are certainly involved with that. In terms of a specific report they have provided, I will need to seek some advice, and I am happy to answer that on notice.

MR BRADDOCK: About the Cladding concessional loan scheme: I am interested in how that has gone in terms of the launch. How much interest has there been? Are you also expecting that all of those building owners will now proceed to participate in the loan scheme? I mean the ones who have expressed interest.

Ms Vassarotti: We are really pleased to see that the loan scheme is now open and operational. It opened to receive applications this week, so it is a good job that we had our hearings delayed because we can confirm that for you! We have had significant interest, and this is one of the important things about the way that the scheme was designed. In designing it in the way where we had phase 1, where we were engaging with people through the testing and assessment phase, we have a pretty good sense of who is interested and who is likely to get involved.

In terms of the loan scheme, it is a voluntary scheme, and it is something that owners' corporations and individual owners will make a decision about whether or not they get involved in it. We know that there are preferences for some owners to participate in levy schemes, for instance, so they would not be looking at needing a loan scheme. We also know, in particular complexes, there might be a mix of people who are able to pay for it straight away and others who want to have the loan.

The design of the loan scheme needed to take that into account, and we will be able to deal with that issue. As we also noted, we knew that there were a number of owners' corporations that had entered into commercial arrangements with other providers, and we were really clear to ensure that we were able to enable them to enter the scheme if they so wished as well, so we have been able to work with our loan provider to ensure that occurs.

I did check, just as we came in, about whether or not we had received any applications. I understand we have not at this point, but we do know that there was a significant level of interest from people who had participated in phase 1 of the scheme. I might look to Mr Edghill in terms of providing a bit more detail.

Mr Edghill: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Further to the minister's remarks, with a little further detail, in terms of not having received final applications yet, that is entirely expected because there is paperwork that needs to be filled out, and before any owners' corporation commits to going through that process they will need to meet and so forth. That will take a little bit of time.

In terms of the interest that we have received in phase 1 of the scheme, it was significant, and that was as a consequence of not just passively waiting for applications to come in.

The team was very proactive in terms of meeting with owners' corporations and associations to the point of knocking on the doors of individual buildings, mail-outs and putting letters in people's letterboxes in every building we were aware that there potentially could be something to be looked at. The team went and addressed every single building, with the consequence that for phase 1 of the scheme, as at 29 August—so this is the testing and commissioning part of the scheme—there were 74 applications which had been submitted.

The vast bulk of those were approved, so 64 of them have been approved to date. There were a small number that were either refused or declined, and that was only five, and that was on the basis that they very clearly did not sit within the parameters of the loan scheme itself. For example, the works had been done years and years ago, or there were other kinds of issues with the application. There are still only three, I think, that we received before the cut-off date that are still going through the assessment process.

As a general comment, where I have been asked to make a decision upon acceptance or otherwise into the scheme, I have taken a conservative approach of erring on the side of allowing access into the testing and commissioning aspect of the scheme.

The application process is closed and now the physical works are happening in the background, so owners' corporations are going through the process of actually having the testing and commissioning undertaken, and that has still got some months to play out before we actually get all the testing and the commissioning reports back in. Just to note again the minister's comments, I think as a consequence of actively advertising the scheme, there has been significant interest in it, and that is reflected in the numbers I have just noted.

MR BRADDOCK: Out of that 74, how many are multi-unit developments, and how many are single residential buildings?

Ms Vassarotti: They are all multi-unit developments. That was part of the eligibility.

MR BRADDOCK: I understand.

Ms Vassarotti: In terms of the eligibility, this is really looking at risk. There were clear parameters around risk. Not all cladding is flammable, and the risk profile will be impacted by things such as where it is put. Obviously, a building that is a single-storey dwelling, in terms of risk, is quite a different proposition. I might look to Mr Edghill to provide a little bit more detail around the eligibility and where that came from—really building on whatever had been done in other jurisdictions and nationally as well.

Mr Edghill: To reiterate the minister's comments, it is primarily focused on multi-unit residential developments, because, if there is a risk, that is where the risk potentially is. The other aspect of the scheme is that the ACT government recognised, for example, that a big commercial organisation that owns a single building somewhere is probably quite sophisticated and capable in its own right to address any issues. It is owners' corporations that may need the additional assistance to help get over the hump of having the testing, commissioning and the works undertaken, and not just in purely financial terms. The team has also done a lot of work in establishing registers, pointing out where people can go to have people undertake fire and assessment works, or eligible building

companies, for example, who might help them. It is not purely a financial scheme in that sense. It is also actively and practically trying to assist owners' corporations.

There were within the scope of the scheme some clusters of lower-level buildings. One of the things that we did find, when we went through the process, is that there are some buildings that are different to what we may have expected when we embarked upon the scheme; but, as I noted before, where we received applications, I erred on the side of admitting people into the scheme.

Again, to pick up on the minister's comments, admission into phase 1 of the scheme does not actually mean that the risk will be higher, once all the testing and commissioning results come back. In some instances, it may provide peace of mind that the cladding risk is low. For others, it may also give them an opportunity to consider how, when or if they wish to replace cladding—does all the cladding on the building need to be replaced, for example, or just some of it? Are there other activities which can be put in place to mitigate the risk of combustion, short of full replacement of the cladding itself? It has been quite intricate in that regard.

To close: given that the second phase of the scheme has just opened to concessional loans, and given that owners' corporations will need to meet before they make applications and we are still working through the physical testing and investigation process, it will probably take a few months to ramp-up before we start seeing a lot of applications come through.

DR PATERSON: Minister, the *Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions in the ACT* report by the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment notes in the recommendations that we must:

Review and expand legislation and ensure compliance of new building regulations related to scope 3 emissions ... incentivise renovation of existing buildings instead of demolition ... increase the reuse of construction and demolition materials for public and private buildings, including the development of an accreditation system

Is there anything that is being done to progress some of those recommendations?

Ms Vassarotti: The issue of scope 3 emissions is a really interesting one within the building and construction area. It is an area where there is quite a lot of interest from industry in relation to working out, particularly in terms of supply chains, what can be done. I have found it an area where there has been a real appetite for conversation, and, in fact, I am hosting a discussion with a number of industry leaders, including the MBA, who are really interested in this conversation, in a couple of weeks. I think we are in the preliminary stages, but there is a real appetite for conversation.

In terms of the conversations that are happening nationally around the National Construction Code, the issue of embodied emissions and scope 3 are ones that we are just starting to have a conversation about. Given the scope and scale of the changes that have been made to the National Construction Code, this time round it did not really get too far progressed, but it will continue to progress at that national level as well. What I can report is that the commissioner's report has been a really useful way to start the conversation.

There are, absolutely, conversations that we need to have locally. Certainly, we have also been talking with ministerial colleagues, such as Minister Steel with his waste portfolio, around the issues of deconstruction and what the opportunities are, and with other portfolios such as heritage, in terms of looking at the reuse of material. There are some really useful conversations happening, but it is early days.

Mr Green: Chair, in reference to the question that I took on notice earlier, I can answer that for you now if that is of assistance.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Green: The report undertaken by the Community and Expert Reference Group was part of some earlier work. The report was tabled in the previous Assembly, in May 2020. The report is also publicly available through the Loose Fill Asbestos website, www.loosefillasbestos.act.gov.au, under the “resource” tab, if people are interested in that. The other report which I was referring to is a report that is under current development, for the closure of the scheme, and that will be presented to the minister shortly.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. We now draw this session to a close. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank Ms Vassarotti and officials for attending today. Naturally, if there are any questions taken on notice, could you provide answers back to the committee secretary within five working days.

Short suspension.

Appearances:

Burch, Ms Joy, Speaker of the ACT Legislative Assembly

Office of the Legislative Assembly

Agostino, Ms Julia, Acting Clerk, Parliamentary Support Branch

Skinner, Mr David, Senior Director, Office of the Clerk

Shashika, Mr Don, Chief Financial Officer, Business Support Branch

THE CHAIR: In this session, we will be hearing from the Speaker of the Office of the Legislative Assembly. Welcome, Madam Speaker, and welcome officials.

As there are new officials present, I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to that privilege statement. The first time when you speak, can you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement. As we do not have any opening statements, we will proceed straight to questions.

MR CAIN: Good afternoon, Speaker and staff. I make reference to your letter of 18 August to the Work Health and Safety Commissioner concerning the prohibition notice. You close by saying, “I reserve the right to pursue legal action in relation to the issuing of the prohibition notice.” Did you seek legal advice on the standing and effectiveness of the prohibition notice?

Ms Burch: I understand the privilege statement. You would be aware that I have been out of country from 19 August, from the day after that letter until yesterday afternoon, so I am still pursuing those activities. It is right and proper that I am back in country in the role of Speaker to pursue those.

MR CAIN: So, you are going to legal advice as the legality of the notice?

Ms Burch: I am continuing to get advice, including legal advice, on the matters.

MR CAIN: Once you get legal advice, is that something you are going to be able to table or share, at least, with this committee?

Ms Burch: I have had a habit, through this process, of being as open and transparent as I can, and I would hope to continue that practice.

MR CAIN: What about court action?

Ms Burch: You know that these matters are not resolved, Mr Cain. I have not got finalised advice yet, so that is a presumption.

MR BRADDOCK: Can you please advise the committee on the practices and policies the Assembly does have in place to ensure it is a COVID-safe setting?

Ms Burch: I will defer to the officials, but, in short, since 2020, so for two years, we have had a standing COVID-safe plan that has been reviewed as needed over the last

two years. Those review processes go through the various structures within OLA, through the OLA work safety committee, and through admin and procedure.

It is very much a live document, to use that term, that is regularly in place. Some of that includes what you see here and what we see every sitting week, where there is hand sanitiser, encouragement to wear masks—it is not a mandate to wear masks—and room limits and the like across the entire building. I will pass to Mr Skinner.

Mr Skinner: I have read and understand the privilege statement. Further to what the Speaker was saying, there is a health and safety committee of the Assembly itself. The reason it is for the Assembly is that it is a slightly unique workplace. We have received legal advice, back in 2019, that each member of the Legislative Assembly is a person conducting a business or undertaking under the WHS Act.

The HSC, the health and safety committee, recognises the shared duty of care and the shared obligations that arise under the WHS Act. It is an attempt to ensure that proper consultation and proper consideration of relevant work health and safety risks and hazards occur. That is not a one-way decision-making process. Staff of each of the three parties represented in the parliament, the PCBU representatives from each of the party groupings and the office all have an opportunity to contribute to that discussion.

Although I am not member of the committee, it is chaired by our executive manager of business support, I understand there is also a union representative. Is that correct Ms Agostino?

Ms Agostino: Yes.

Mr Skinner: That is probably the central clearing house and forum for consultation and interactions between PCBU representatives, affected staff, and affected workers. That is an important feature.

The other feature that is brought to bear is the Standing Committee on Administration and Procedure, which is, as you would know, the internal governance committee of the Assembly. It seeks to make sure that business in the chamber is conducted in an orderly way. It looks at issues of administration and entitlements, precinct issues and so forth.

I know that the Speaker has been very keen to involve that group in decision-making about COVID measures—about things like masks, about things like physical distancing in the chamber and other places. That committee is composed of the whips of each party, and they serve as a nexus between their party rooms and the admin committee. Often they will be involved in having discussions with their own party groupings to ensure that they bring to bear relevant considerations in the WHS space. That is another important feature of our unique workplace in managing WHS risks.

The COVID-safe plan that the Speaker alluded to is an attempt to have an umbrella document that caters for that unique set of circumstances. There are subsidiary risk assessments and so on that flow into and from that document. It is the document that is, essentially, an umbrella, which hopefully has a bearing and a relevance in guiding members, the office, the Speaker, their staff, those that work in the building and those that visit the building as to what COVID-safe looks like in our precincts. It has been the

subject of continuous and ongoing consideration.

Ms Burch: Just to add to that final point—it is not static. Our lived experience has been that limiting the number of MLAs in the Chamber; we have provided additional seats so we can physically distance; and the public spaces are still closed in this parliament, so the reception room is not open for external third parties to come in.

There is the ongoing need to review and reflect. You also mentioned visitors—one of the next items I want to look at and ponder is with visitors. We have an obligation amongst all members that if there is a case, a positive case, that is notified to HR and then HR comes back to all building occupants and notifies of that. We have not dealt with passholders that come into the building and then subsequently test positive—but they have been in the building within that qualified period of, I think, two days beforehand. That is also a question: if someone is a passholder and has access to the building, and then tests positive, what is their obligation to let the building know and whoever they have seen know. That, I think, is an example of how it is not static, and it will continue to evolve.

MR BRADDOCK: For clarity's sake, can you confirm if that COVID-safe arrangement also applies to committee hearings as an activity?

Ms Burch: Yes, it does.

DR PATERSON: I think the Speaker might have answered this. With visitors and passholders to the Assembly, what is their duty of care?

Ms Burch: When we had a mask mandate for the building, those passholders were part of that mandate. What we applied to ourselves, we would apply to visitors coming into the place, and the same with committees. There was a time when committees had hearings and every room has a limit. Visitors and witnesses were compliant and told to wear masks to be part of the process.

I will maintain, whatever we decide through admin and procedure—and I have been very collaborative with them because it is important that we are all singing from the same song sheet, so to speak—that what we apply to ourselves will apply to others coming into the building, because this is initiated to make sure we have a safe workplace, and we have had those plans in place for two years.

DR PATERSON: The OLA has recently launched the new parliamentary portal for MLAs and staff to put questions on notice. I am wondering how the implementation of that new scheme is going?

Ms Burch: I will ask Ms Agostino, the Acting Clerk, to respond to that.

Ms Agostino: I have read and understood the privilege statement. Thank you for your question. I can tell you that there are two elements to the portal. There is one that is used by committee support, and there is one that is used by chamber support. They do a similar thing but there are two branches to it. They are both being deployed; however, we are at that point at the beginning of the use of those portals, so we are working through a few bugs and glitches as they come up. The best way for us to fix those things

is for members to use them. We understand some members are using them more than others. We would encourage all members to use them, because that will help us figure out how well they are operating, and we can fix any bugs as we go along.

MR CAIN: Madam Speaker, I quote from the Assembly website:

Members of the Assembly do not have separate electorate offices. Their offices in the Assembly building are used for both parliamentary and electorate business.

Do any current members have an electorate office?

Ms Burch: I might defer. Well, we know that one member promotes an electorate office where he goes. I could claim that my A-frame in front of many a shop is an electoral office as well! But I am not privy to any private undertakings or arrangements that members would have, other than I know I turn up with my A-frame at the local shops. No one here has any information on any arrangements that somebody may have. It is not arranged through us; therefore, it is a private arrangement.

MR CAIN: Why do members not have separate electorate offices and how much would such an office cost?

Ms Burch: This comes up regularly at times, over the 30-odd years of self-government, probably most recently when we went through the expansion from 17 to 25 members. It was well canvassed along with the overall cost of the expansion. Among the key questions was, as we have multi-member electorates, do we have five offices in Brindabella and in Ginninderra and in other electorates, or do we have one office and the five members operate out of there? These were some of the options. Every version or every option was costed, and it was prohibitive—not prohibitive; it was costly. It was determined that, because we are an island state and effectively close by, we can manage with the good old-fashioned way of hiring a local community hall. I have done that, through Tuggeranong Community Centre, Communities@Work. I have gone in and hired community space and promoted the public to come in and visit at that point.

MR CAIN: How long ago was this costing done with the two models? What were the—

Ms Burch: I am quite happy to take on notice if we can find that information and provide it to the committee just for interest. I am sure it is not confidential in that sense. So, what I can find, I am quite happy to provide.

MR CAIN: Has there ever been, since self-government, any facility for a member to have an electorate office at all?

Ms Burch: In what sense?

MR CAIN: Well, has there ever been a time to your knowledge where we have had electorate offices in the electorate for members?

Ms Burch: No. Certainly not paid by the OLA.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

I refer to page 39 of last year's budget statements A. One of the priorities was, "Continue the implementation of the digital transformation of the Assembly's business processes." I notice in this year's budget statements A on page 37 that is not listed as a priority. Could you explain why it was there last year and it is not there this year as a priority of OLA?

Ms Agostino: Thank you, Mr Cain, I will take your question. I do not have an answer for why it is not listed as a priority, but I can tell you that those projects have all been progressed—some of them to completion or near completion. So, for example, the portals are close to completion. The new petitions system has been completed and is in use. There has been work done in the broadcasting area; Assembly on Demand has been replaced and, I believe, some other incidental work has been done. So, really, we have progressed so far; I imagine that is why we do not have it in this year's.

MR CAIN: There is nothing being worked on at the moment waiting for completion or there is?

Ms Agostino: No, there are things that are being worked on, but we are so close to the finish, I think, in most cases that they are not the same as getting something up and running as a priority, I would suggest. If I look at the priorities for this year, we have things that largely are in the or early-on stages—for example, the strategic plan, the review of the standing orders and so on. Some of those things have to even be commenced. So, they will be our priorities for the year going forward. Whereas I would imagine, for the most part, with the digital projects that we have left, we would probably complete them quite soon.

MR CAIN: Are you able to provide, as a question taken on notice perhaps, a list of what those are?

Ms Agostino: Yes, we can take that on notice.

MR CAIN: And the expected completion date?

Ms Agostino: Yes, we can take that on notice. If I could through you, Chair, just clarify my earlier answer about the two NovaWorks questions portals?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Agostino: I just want to clarify that they both are operational as I said, but the one that is being used by Chamber support, the Chamber support staff are putting the questions into the system so that we can make it more user friendly for members at this point and figure out the glitches, and then we will open it up for you to use.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: Looking at the budget policy decision titled, "Implement restructure of committee support for Assembly committees to ensure best practice committee support," what exactly is the territory getting for its money?

Ms Burch: Restructuring the committees?

MR BRADDOCK: Yes. What benefits will flow to the territory?

Ms Burch: Given her hands-on involvement in the committee support restructure, I will go to the Deputy Clerk. But over my time here I have seen the need for change. I think the restructure is the change that is timely for the committees. I will hand over.

Ms Agostino: Thank you, Mr Braddock. Could you repeat that question? I did not quite catch it.

MR BRADDOCK: I am just trying to understand in terms of the budget line item what is the benefit to the territory as a result of this initiative?

Ms Agostino: That is a really good question. The benefits are that the Assembly can do more work and they can do it more efficiently, and we can support committees better to do their work, which of course is a function of the Assembly.

As you know, we did a couple of reviews of committee support. One was done by Dr Rosemary Laing, who looked at all sorts of issues including practice, structure and so on. Then we had a workforce consultant come in and look at the actual structure. Where we landed was that we needed some more staff and we needed to structure it differently. That, as I say, has a benefit to the committee's system because it means that we can support the committee system more efficiently. It also, I believe, has a benefit to the staff because we are sharing the work differently and we are making improvements to how the staff do their jobs. So those I would say are the benefits. Overall I think it depends on how you look at it as well. There could be a metric. For example, in the Assembly you might see that you are getting a whole lot more reports or you are getting a different type of report, which of course is the end result of each committee's work you produce these reports.

I think we have a little way to go before we see the full results, but those are the benefits that I can see at this point.

Ms Burch: Can I just add to that? Being a single house parliament, the role and structure of the committees office is really important. Their powers of inquiry and the fact that we refer bills now to committees that we did not before—so, there is structural referral change—means the committees are asked to look at more things. But also the power of the committee to inquire into bills, budgets, policy decisions, areas of interest for the community that is reflected through law or policy development here, is a great financial benefit for this parliament and for the greater community in my view.

Ms Agostino: Yes, and I would agree with everything Madam Speaker has just said in terms of the additional scrutiny that committees can provide.

MR BRADDOCK: Ms Agostino, you mentioned it might take a little while for the benefits to flow. Do you have a rough timeframe in terms of when you expect that?

Ms Agostino: How long is a piece of string, Mr Braddock. I think it is very early days; we did have annual reporting and so on. So I think we will start picking up some of

those metrics as we go along. At the moment we are still to recruit the one or two final members of the team. So we do not even have a complete team yet. We are working on it. Recruitment is taking place as we speak. Once that is in place and the team beds in, I would imagine that you will start to see more benefits and that the staff will start to feel the benefits of the new structure.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

DR PATERSON: What are the priorities of the Office of the Legislative Assembly going forward? Are there any areas of increased funding that are needed over the next couple of years that have not been identified?

Ms Agostino: Thank you, Dr Paterson. I can only tell you that we have identified a few of our priorities that we do need to focus on. We are a small office, so we do have to really focus on those priorities and not really stray from them.

We do have a few things coming up: our strategic plan, and work has started on that. That is being driven by the Executive Management Committee, but certainly the working groups are staff led. We are getting a fantastic response so far from staff, who have been given this forum in which to be very frank with the organisation about what they see the organisation should focus on in coming years, in all sorts of areas. It is really access-all-areas for them; they can make suggestions however they choose.

We have the new EBA coming up. At the moment, the core stage of that is being managed by CMTEDD, but there will come a point at which we become involved in a very hands-on way. That is a little way down the track.

Then we have the new standing orders and continuing resolutions, which is a requirement under the standing orders. That will happen next year because it is the third year of the term. So we do have priorities that are identified and they will take a fair few resources for us to manage those things.

Mr Skinner: I might make a couple of other observations on the strategic planning front and how they link to priorities and so forth. Our staff have been very much involved in generating ideas and feedback around what they consider are the important things about running a parliamentary administration. Themes are definitely starting to emerge that are quite in alignment with both the statutory purpose of the office and what it is that we do here, which is to support members, their committees and the parliament itself.

Staff worked in teams to develop, with some prompts, some ideas around the sorts of things that they would like to see in a parliamentary administration. Certainly the independence of the office is coming through as a very important feature of the identity and the important institutional roles that the office performs.

Another thing coming through with staff is the need to address some of the issues that have arisen out of COVID around hybrid work, flexible work, how do we make sure that people can maintain human connections while at the same time being able to work from home or in other locations. There is somewhat of a paradox there, which is that, as you rely more and more on technology to do your work, you have less and less

in-person communication. So how we manage that and do it in a way that is WHS-compliant and that recognises all of our duties and obligations there, is going to need to be worked through.

Also coming through is workloads and how people can match and tailor the work they do versus the work they are given in the context that it is very difficult for the office to control all the inputs to its workflows, whether that be committees or the Assembly. We need to be able to cater for the rises and the falls and to smooth that out as much as possible. We are also looking at feedback from the member survey that was done last year. Some of the themes that members are identifying also are in reasonable alignment with what staff are saying.

I think that the document that we end up with, which will hopefully be a fairly well received and a consensus-style document, will chart a course, but they are some of the things that I have detected as we have been going through this process. I hope that in a way sets a bit of a roadmap throughout the remainder of this Assembly and into part of the Eleventh Assembly.

DR PATERSON: Thank you.

MR CAIN: I make reference to page 46 of budget statements A, partway down:

Supplies and services: the increase of \$0.313 million in the 2021-22 estimated outcome from the 2021-22 Budget is largely due to payments made to improve Information Communication Technology capabilities of the office and initiation of committee support restructure.

Could you talk in particular about why those extra funds are needed for those two activities?

Ms Burch: I am going to pass to the CFO.

Mr Shashika: I have read and understood the privilege statement. As the Deputy Clerk explained, there were new systems introduced during the financial year 2021-22. Those systems required additional resources being put to increase functionality and efficiencies. The committee support restructuring function required engagement of consultants, as explained before by the Deputy Clerk, to assess the current structure and have the consultations processes to give the recommendations made. Those were the two key areas that were addressed.

MR CAIN: It says that \$0.313 million was spent largely on those. Roughly, what percentage on those two activities was that of the \$0.313 million? And what was the balance spent on?

Mr Shashika: There were some other payments made to contractors and consultants as well, and rental charges. In terms of the percentage, we can take that on notice and provide you with percentages.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We now draw this session to a close. Thank you, Madam Speaker, for

attending, and OLA staff as well. Naturally, if any questions have been taken on notice, please provide an answer to the committee secretary within five working days.

Ms Burch: Can I just make a comment? I usually would do it in opening statements, but I will take one minute to thank the OLA staff over this year but also over the difficult two years where we have had the pandemic—we can sit, we cannot sit, we are sitting with masks on—so I want to thank the back-of-house staff for all the support they provide the members here. Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: We could say the same from the committee's perspective and also members of this Assembly. We really appreciate all the hard work that you do. You are the backbone of this Assembly and certainly the backbone of this committee on estimates. We really appreciate everything that you do.

Ms Burch: Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: The committee will now adjourn.

Hearing suspended from 12.58 to 2 pm

Appearances:

Berry, Ms Yvette, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Early Childhood Development, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation and Minister for Women

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General
Gilding, Ms Louise, Executive Group Manager, Housing ACT
Loft, Ms Catherine, Executive Branch Manager; Infrastructure and Contracts
Aigner, Mr Geoff, Executive Branch Manager; Client Services
Summerrell, Mrs Jessica, Executive Branch Manager, Children Youth and Families

Education Directorate

Haire, Ms Katy, Director-General
Simmons, Ms Jane, Deputy Director-General
Efthymiades, Ms Deb, Deputy Director-General, System Policy and Reform
Moysey, Mr Sean, Executive Branch Manager, System Policy and Reform
Moore, Dr Nicole, Executive Branch Manager, System Policy and Reform

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

Ponton, Mr Ben, Director-General

Suburban Land Agency

Dietz, Mr John, Chief Executive Officer
Gordon, Mr Tom, Executive Director, Development Delivery
Thorman, Mr Rob, Program Manager, Sustainability and Release Coordination
Holt, Mr Nicholas, Executive Director; Built Form and Divestment
Tennent, Mr Simon, Development Director, Development Delivery—Molonglo
Sharp, Ms Irena, Program Manager, Development Delivery—Urban and Commercial

THE CHAIR: In this session we will hear from the Minister for Early Childhood Development. Welcome, Ms Berry and officials.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw their attention to the privilege statement. The first time that you speak, could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement.

We are not beginning with opening statements. We will go straight to questions. I will pass my substantive question to Mr Hanson.

MR HANSON: I have a question about page 144 of the budget outlook. There is a program for four-year-old preschool. It says that the commonwealth's funding contribution to public preschools has reduced under the preschool reform program. I assume that is the 15 hours that is provided for four-year-olds. It says it has fallen by \$2.1 million in the first year and then \$1.13 million. I would like a little bit more detail

on what is going on there and why that amount has fallen. It would be quite interesting to know how much that total amounts to. It says it has fallen by \$2.1 million; why? What is actually the total amount provided by the commonwealth for four-year-olds?

Ms Berry: Thank you for the question, Mr Hanson. I will ask Ms Efthymiades to provide you with a little bit more detail on the breakdown of the funding and how it works.

Ms Efthymiades: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Mr Hanson, it relates to what was previously called the universal access national partnership for four-year-olds. The collective commitment across government was for 15 hours of preschool for four-year-olds, and the commonwealth made a contribution. That agreement was a year-on-year-on-year agreement. Ministers around the country were saying for some time: “We need some more certainty on this. This year-by-year thing is no good.” The commonwealth government put up a four-year duration, which was fantastic, but with that certainty there were a few trade-offs. One of the trade-offs was that the amount for the ACT, which is \$9.7 million per year, is not indexed. The ACT government has had to make a commitment to cover that gap.

Part of the new agreement is that there is a concept called “funding follows the child”. It has not all been worked through and the settings have not all been finalised yet. Essentially, that means some of the \$9.7 million will need to go to the non-government sector—inclusive of preschools in non-government schools and preschools in the broader early childhood education and care sector. That gap also has had to be redressed through this. That is what this money is for.

MR HANSON: So that \$2 million is enough to get us up to the 15 hours. New South Wales and Victoria announced that they would fund an additional 15 hours, to bring it up to 30. That was done as a joint announcement between New South Wales and Victoria; was the ACT invited to participate in that?

Ms Haire: Mr Hanson, I am happy to kick off on that; I will pass to my colleagues for more detail if needed. The announcements from Victoria and New South Wales extend to a period 10 years hence. In fact, the first phase of both of their announcements is to shift to 15 hours of free preschool. It is called different names in different jurisdictions. In fact, that has them catching up with what we have had here in the ACT for around 10 years. We have free preschool in government schools for all children in their year before school.

What they have done, though, is project out to 10 years time, when they will be getting up to 30 hours for children in their year before school. It is very exciting to see other jurisdictions catching up with what we have known here in the ACT for a long time, which is that the early years are the most important years of a child’s education. Similarly, they have made announcements around expanding the provision to three-year-olds, which, as you would also know, has been in place in the ACT for certain three-year-olds for a number of years. We are expanding that to all three-year-olds by 2024.

MR HANSON: For a four-year-old in the ACT, 15 hours is covered by the commonwealth—

Ms Haire: Jointly funded by the commonwealth and the ACT.

MR HANSON: For 15 hours, yes; so there is \$9.7 million from the commonwealth and \$2 million or so from the ACT. Deb is shaking her head.

Ms Haire: I will revert to Deb on that.

THE CHAIR: If you are a four-year-old in the ACT, how many hours of schooling do you get? Is it 15 hours? Is it more than 15?

Ms Haire: It is 15 hours of free preschool for four-year-olds in the ACT, which is jointly funded by the ACT and the commonwealth government. We have had to increase, as Deb said—

MR HANSON: In the ACT we are getting 15 hours, and in New South Wales and Victoria they are saying they are going to 30 hours. How can you say they are playing catch-up with us if they are announcing something that is double what we are providing?

Ms Berry: The systems in the ACT, Victoria and New South Wales are very different. Our preschools in the ACT are attached to our schools and have been in place for 50-something years. Young people have been able to access preschools that have been attached to our primary schools for a number of years. There is the funding partnership with the commonwealth government, which the ACT government contributes to. In the ACT, 15 hours of free preschool education is provided in our government school system.

With respect to Victoria, Ms Efthymiades more of a breakdown of the comparisons between the New South Wales announcements and our own, and why they are catching up. Previously, Victoria did not have 15 hours of free preschool education. Also, what needs to be taken into account is that we are in a crisis regarding early childhood educators. We need to recruit more workers across the country, not just here in the ACT. Part of the Victorian announcement—and we can go through that in detail—is around infrastructure. In fact, a significant part of their funding announcement was around infrastructure—that is, putting in modular units across the region to provide spaces for early childhood education which they had not previously provided.

MR HANSON: They were not previously getting their 15 hours because of a lack of facilities; is that right?

Ms Berry: That is right.

MR HANSON: Some were and some were not, I guess.

Ms Efthymiades: The difference is that it has been free here since 2012. In other jurisdictions they have had universal access to 15 hours, but not free. That is the journey that New South Wales and Victoria are now on.

MR HANSON: They have said that, regardless of the slightly different starting points, over a period they will get to 30 hours of free preschool for four-year-olds. But we are

going to remain at 15 hours for four-year-olds.

Ms Berry: Those are decisions that the government would need to make in the future. At the moment we have made our commitment and that has been in place since 2012. We have been phasing in universal access for three-year-olds. New South Wales and Victoria have now taken a few steps ahead of us into the future. Those are things that we consider through the implementation of our early childhood strategy. It is not a policy decision that we are making today, Mr Hanson.

MR HANSON: No. I am not going to ask you to announce policy, either. Did New South Wales and Victoria consult with you with regard to that decision so that, going into the future—accepting that there is a bit of a dovetail regarding what they are doing—whether you are in New South Wales, Victoria or the ACT, you would end up getting the same provision? Did they correspond? They did not speak to you guys at all?

Ms Berry: No.

MR BRADDOCK: I would like to ask about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and whether the ACT government has a plan. How will it be able to respond in supporting young people through what has been a very tricky two years for them?

Ms Haire: Are you speaking about early childhood?

MR BRADDOCK: Yes.

Ms Haire: Mr Moysey has been working with our early childhood sector on how we have been supporting the early childhood sector and how they have been supporting children through the COVID epidemic.

MR BRADDOCK: I will rephrase my terminology: young people and children.

Mr Moysey: I will give some context. In 2021 the COVID experience was incredibly challenging for the sector, but it showed great resilience throughout that time. One of the things that we developed in 2020, and we responded again in 2021, was a supportive framework for the sector, as an essential service, because of the demand for continuity in the sector.

We broke it into four parts of support for the sector, which included support around what children were going through, and to enable staff to have continuity of practice with those children. We were able to do some great peer-based online forums with educators to support children in the service. Also, educators were keeping relationships going with families and children who were not in the service; they were at home at the time. We saw some great practice there, and we got some great support from the Australian Childhood Foundation as an expert in trauma-informed practice.

The story for that period is about the continuity of the service and the continuity of relationships with children. Obviously, COVID still has an impact; it impacts workforce. But the continuity is still there, and the workforce is still very strong in their

relationships with children.

DR PATERSON: Minister, as part of Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT, the ACT government is currently providing two days a week of free early childhood education to a select number of three-year-olds. There are 100 spots set aside for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids across the five Koori preschools. Have you seen a good uptake of these spots?

Ms Berry: I will ask Ms Efthymiades to provide an update on that, because it has been a really important program for young people and their families. The difference regarding this program is that it is not just about the young people; we invite their families to be part of the preschool opportunities, and there is wraparound care and support that go with that.

Ms Efthymiades: With Koori preschool, the first feature of that was a co-design process for cultural safety in our Koori preschools, so that they would be welcoming and inviting for families. That was the first stage of that initiative. Since then we have had 36 three-year-olds enrolled. Regarding the take-up of the 100 places available, we expect that to continue to grow, as we come out of the pandemic and more and more people are confident about their kids being in other environments more often. We think that is a pretty solid start, and comes off the strength of the co-design process, which someone else could speak to, if you want to know more about it.

DR PATERSON: Yes, it would be great to hear a bit more about that process.

Ms Haire: Ms Simmons is online. She can speak about the co-design process that was undertaken with the Koori community. It is interesting to know about the long history of involvement of the ACT Aboriginal community in Koori preschool. As with our 15 hours of free preschool, it is one of the other things that is a unique feature of the ACT. I will ask Ms Simmons to talk about the co-design process.

Ms Simmons: I acknowledge that I have read the privilege statement. The Koori preschool program, as Deb Efthymiades indicated, was involved in a previous co-design process that was about ensuring that pedagogy and practice are in our Koori preschool, and that it respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and honours the expectations of the Aboriginal community.

There were 170 people involved in that co-design process. It took on the perspective of and had Aboriginal community involvement in that co-design process to inform the Koori preschool curriculum. It was also undertaken in a framework of cultural safety. There are a number of aspects—I can go into more detail, if you wish—in relation to how that informed the curriculum.

The important piece is that it is co-designed with community and it is for the benefit of young people in our Koori preschools. It also aligns with the cultural safety framework. It is a powerful way of ensuring that young people in our Koori preschools feel safe and secure.

DR PATERSON: You said you hope to continue to get an increase in numbers, up to the 100 placements. Is there any proactive work happening to try and engage more

families in the program?

Ms Berry: Yes, Dr Paterson—engaging with community all the time, understanding families’ needs and doing those kinds of soft referrals. We find we have great success if we do that with people who have relationships with the families. The important thing that we have been trying to get across today is around the development of the whole Koori preschool program, the Koori preschool curriculum and the cultural safety framework, which I think is available online; I have hard copies that we can provide to the committee, if that is helpful.

That has been an important piece of work that we developed with Shona Chapman, a well-known and well-respected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander member, who has worked very closely with Education, within our preschools and with families, to put this preschool curriculum together for Koori kids. I can provide hard copies, if that is helpful.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we are happy to receive them. Dr Paterson will move that we publish them.

DR PATERSON: Yes.

MRS KIKKERT: Is the Ngunnawal language taught at the Koori preschool?

Ms Haire: I will pass to Ms Simmons on that. I will start by saying that the Ngunnawal language, as people will be aware, is in the process of being reclaimed and redeveloped by the Ngunnawal people. The establishment of the Ngunnawal language centre, through CSD, I think, in last year’s budget, is an element of that.

In the schools part of this portfolio, we are working with the Ngunnawal language centre to develop Ngunnawal language programs for schools. Ms Simmons may be able to assist; I am not aware that we are, at this stage, teaching Ngunnawal language in any of our Koori preschools. That will be further down the track, as the Ngunnawal people are reclaiming the language, through the Ngunnawal language centre. We are developing resources and support. I believe that would be something that would be considered further down the line. I will check whether Ms Simmons has any further information on that.

Ms Simmons: In October 2020, permission was granted from the Ngunnawal community regarding the use of language in developing a co-design process. The language is not taught. There are words that are embedded in the culture, the experiences, the learnings and songs that are undertaken in the preschool settings.

MRS KIKKERT: The Ngunnawal language is taught at Belconnen High School, as the minister knows. I thought it would be taught at the preschool, at the same time.

MR HANSON: With the teacher shortage, how is that playing out in early learning, at that level? I have a couple of quotes from the *Canberra Times*:

We’re hearing reports of staff going into retail, Aldi or Bunnings, because the casual weekend rates are significantly higher than early educators’ hourly rate.

Another one is:

We don't have a shortage of early educators, we have a shortage of early educators who want to work in early education ...

What steps is the government taking to make sure that we have enough early educators in the system?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question, Mr Hanson. This has been a challenge in the early childhood space for many decades. The early childhood workforce has been working towards getting respect, awareness and recognition of their qualifications and the work they do in developing young people before they start their formal education, if you like.

Of course, this crisis around skills and teachers, in particular, has impacted on our early childhood centres as well, and has exacerbated the issues they were already facing, with low pay and a lack of awareness of the work they do. Even today, they are having to change the conversation and make sure that people understand it involves much more than blowing noses and changing nappies; it is actually about a child's brain development. That is a significant part of the work that early childhood educators do.

The ACT has the ability to do a lot of work to support educators within our early childhood system—supporting opportunities for scholarships, masters degrees and the like. I will ask Mr Moysey to provide a bit of detail on that.

Mr Moysey: Following advice from the advisory council on early childhood, the current form of the scholarships program offers \$25,000 per applicant for people in the sector to take up tertiary qualifications to become an early childhood teacher. That is offered over four years, or eight years part time. The scholarship also supports providers and services with payments for backfill, so that staff can do practicals and there is no disruption in staffing requirements for those services.

As of June 2022, there were 23 scholarship holders studying towards a degree in early childhood education, and an additional eight scholarship holders are in the process of commencing. Since the tertiary scholarship, in all of its forms, commenced in 2014, 32 scholarship holders have successfully completed early childhood degrees.

One of the advantages of the current scholarship program is that it encourages that relationship between the person studying, the service provider and the university—the holistic engagement. As people work through that qualification, they are actually working in the service as well. That builds expertise, and we know that it adds value.

Ms Berry: One of the things that is a challenge in the early childhood space, and it is something that needs to be addressed, is low wages. You are right; people have chosen retail over early childhood because of the incredible responsibility they have, and the wages do not match that responsibility.

The early childhood sector did put in a claim for equal pay, given that the sector comprises 97 or 98 per cent women, and the pay, compared to the same qualifications

in a more male-dominated space, is around 10 per cent less. The equal pay claim that was made to the workplace relations commission was knocked back at the time. There is another opportunity to do that, given the impact that COVID has had, and the fact that we are looking at how, as a country, we can recognise the work of our aged-care workforce, who are working under the same kinds of conditions as the early childhood workforce.

In making sure that we recognise the work of those individuals in female-dominated work areas—vital work, nonetheless—I am very hopeful that the federal government will look into that, as part of the skills and workforce shortage work they have been doing over the last couple of days.

In the ACT we are doing our own workforce consultations to understand the pressure within the local ACT context. I do not think much has changed in the last couple of decades, with respect to the work that early childhood educators do, and the recognition by our community of that work.

Here in the ACT we have an early childhood strategy. I think we were the first in the country to develop a strategy specifically for early childhood which recognised the workers in the space, not just young people or workforce participation. It values workers, because if we value our young people, we have to value the early childhood educators in this space.

That has been very positively received. We are busily implementing that strategy and continuing to work with the sector about how we can make even more improvements with the levers that we have in our control.

MR HANSON: With COVID, has that increased or decreased demand? With a lot of people working from home now, are families keeping children at home? Particularly with respect to women, there are less women required to be actually in the office. Has that had any tangible effect? With staff, has that meant a decrease in staff or more staff becoming available? Is there an ongoing impact as more people work from home?

Ms Berry: Mr Moysey can provide some detail there, if we have it.

Mr Moysey: Certainly, if we look at the Productivity Commission's report, every year we can see continued demand for early childhood services in the ACT. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that people reconsidered what access they needed through COVID. There was obviously the free element, towards the end of 2020, that the commonwealth made available. We see there a steady increase that is commensurate with the needs of the community, and some decisions.

The three main choices that families will make are: proximate to home, proximate to work, and something about the relationship they might have with extended family coming in from Yass or coming in from Queanbeyan—things like that. There are those choices about transport and proximity to work or home. There is anecdotal evidence showing that people made some choices about movement, but we would need to work through how that looks, in terms of the data that the commonwealth would hold.

MR HANSON: Anecdotally, it has been put to me that there has been a change in

where people want to go, because more people want access to early learning centres closer to home, rather than closer to work, if they do not go into the city. There are a number of places in the city, and potentially in the parliamentary triangle, where demand has decreased, whereas it is increasing elsewhere. Has that been mapped at all?

Mr Moysey: We have not mapped it. That is what the sector is telling us in our engagement with the sector. I would not classify it as a dramatic shift, where we have services saying they have had an enormous change. These changes tend to even out as well. There is also family choice. With how people choose the services, it does not necessarily always fall into those three categories. There is the relationship between families and services, and how they feel about that, too.

MRS KIKKERT: Minister, I have been asking questions for several years about the child and family centres' flat level of service provision, despite the territory's obvious population growth. This year's budget projects a 15 per cent increase in occasions of services, based on increased demand. In answer to a question in June, you said that "it is still too early to predict future demand". What was actual demand like last year and how has it informed this target? Why does the target show no more increases across the forward estimates?

Mrs Summerrell: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. In answer to the number of occasions of service for clients in the child and family centres, this year we saw 10,268. COVID certainly has had an impact on the occasions of service that we have seen. We are hearing and seeing that families are tired and exhausted from the impacts of COVID.

We have seen some change in relation to the overall occasions of service. We predict that that will continue for a little while. Particularly through winter, we have seen the impacts of that, as families grapple with the needs of staying home, managing illness and the ongoing complexities of the winter that we have seen. Despite that, we have continued to provide the services and the programs through the child and family centres, to meet that demand.

In relation to the programs that are run there, at the moment we do not have extensive waitlists for the programs. If someone came in partway through a term, for example, and wanted to start on a program, they would go on a waitlist for the next term. But we are not holding long waitlists for the programs that we run through the centres.

MRS KIKKERT: Despite a projected 15 per cent increase in occasions of service, this budget increases funding for child and family centres by only \$11,000. In the past you have stated, Minister, that centres deal with increased demand "by utilising strategies such as referral to other services using the use of a waiting list". Why is there such a small amount of \$11,000 when there has been an increase of 15 per cent in occasions of services?

Ms Rule: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Mrs Kikkert, I am not quite sure where you are getting the figure of \$11,000 from. If you could give us that reference, that would be helpful.

MRS KIKKERT: Yes. That is on page 17.

Ms Rule: We will look at those numbers. I would emphasise what Mrs Summerrell said. There actually is not a waiting list, so we are not seeing a significant increase. It is a demand-driven service. If we were seeing an increase, I would expect that we would discuss that with the minister and go back to budget, as needed, to talk about the options for meeting the demand for that service. At the moment the demand is met. There is not unmet demand in those services at the moment, because there are not people on the waiting list.

MR HANSON: I am just wondering if you can give me a sense of how preschool for three-year-olds is progressing, I think it is 500 places available for priority children and 100 for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. Is there a capacity issue there? Is that fully subscribed? How are you selecting who is on that?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question, Mr Hanson. We have been phasing in the three-year-old preschool and targeting it to families who have children who are most in need, making sure that it is those families that we refer for the three-year-old preschool program.

That is one I talked about before, in answer to Dr Paterson's question about those soft referrals. The relationships that those families might have with a range of different services across the ACT are part of the referral of those families and their children. I can ask Dr Moore to take you through how that program works. I think it is important to understand how it works and why we have targeted the numbers in the way we have, and the reason that we have been phasing it in from the start.

Dr Moore: Thank you. I have read and understood the privilege statement. We are really excited about the three-year-old initiative, and we have seen steady growth over time. The initiative has been in place now since 2020. Earlier this year we celebrated our 500th child coming into the program, which was very, very exciting for us.

At the moment, we have had 553 children referred in. The way that the model works is that we work with a system of warm referrers. A warm referrer is somebody who already has an established relationship with families who might be experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability. We really rely on their professional judgement to identify children who would benefit most from this particular program.

The types of warm referrers we have are our early childhood education and care services. Often those services have a range of family support programs that they also run, so they might be identifying children through those programs that they run. The Child Development Service, the child and family centres and Health Services, as well as refuges, also are up there in terms of warm referrals that we are seeing coming through the initiative.

They make the referral and that referral is considered by the placement pathway panel. They will look at the needs of the children that are being referred in. They will look at things like their family circumstances, their location and the type of service that would best meet their need. Then they are able to work with one of our partnered service providers to identify a placement for that child.

We have 17 different providers that we work with, which deliver across 58 different services across the ACT. Once the child is identified, referred into the program and the warm referrer has worked with the family to go through that process, we identify a placement. Then we partner with the family and the warm referrer to go out and do site visits, to get to know the service, to make sure that they are really comfortable with the service that they are going to be accessing for their children.

So it is a bit of a process, but it is really important, given the level of disadvantage and vulnerability of these children and families, that we do that in a very supported way. That is why we have chosen the warm referral model as a way of identifying and supporting families into the system.

MR HANSON: You said that you had about 550 referrals?

Dr Moore: 553 at the current time.

MR HANSON: And that is since 2020.

Dr Moore: Yes.

MR HANSON: So how many are active currently?

Dr Moore: Currently, we have 262 children active. The unique thing about this program, as opposed to, say, our four-year-old preschool, is that children can come into the service at any time, as soon as they turn three, so we have a rolling intake. What we generally see is that that number will creep up throughout the year and then, at the end of the year, quite a large number of children will transition into four-year-old preschool. So we have supported transitions at that point.

MR HANSON: But it is funded for 600, isn't it?

Dr Moore: This is the 500, but we also have the Koori preschool, so that is separate.

MR HANSON: But I thought it was funded for 500 and then—

Dr Moore: And then the Koori pre.

MR HANSON: Is it that, of that 500, 100 are Indigenous, or is it 500 then 100 for—

Dr Moore: It is 500 for the three-year-old initiative, and 100 for Koori pre. So children could be accessing Koori pre and also accessing the three-year-old initiative. They are separate programs.

MR HANSON: Right. In a sense, you have got enough money to meet demand for where you are at, at the moment.

Dr Moore: Correct.

MR HANSON: So do you look to then expand and try to get more people referred in? Is that what you are looking to do?

Dr Moore: Absolutely. We are currently having about 10 to 20 children referred in every fortnight. It is growing. There have been, throughout the years since we have been operating, obviously some disruptions from COVID that we have talked about. That did create a pause and some slowing down of referrals. But this year we have seen steady growth of, as I said, between 10 and 20 children every fortnight. We are seeing those numbers grow. By the end of the year we expect we will have more children in the program and then, as we have seen in the last two years, we will see a significant number of those children transition to four-year-old pre.

MR HANSON: All right. Thanks very much.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question on the modernisation of the Children and Young People Act and how that is going to have impacts or consequences or positive results for young people. Can you please take me through that?

Ms Rule: That is not an early childhood issue, Mr Braddock.

MR BRADDOCK: My apologies.

Ms Rule: It is more in the family services space, with Minister Stephen-Smith. We do not have those officials here today.

MR BRADDOCK: Fair enough.

DR PATERSON: I am not sure if this is your portfolio either, or this session: the child and family centres?

Ms Berry: Yes.

DR PATERSON: There are currently three child and family centres across the ACT delivering a range of services focusing on children pre-birth to eight-year-olds. What are the most popular services that are being utilised in those centres?

Mrs Summerrell: Thanks very much for the question. The child and family centres deliver a range of programs across all different centres. Many of them are highly subscribed and really popular programs. Some of the centres provide very specific programs to that community and some of them are culturally specific programs for the needs of a particular community. Looking at some of the groups that are quite popular, Circle of Security is a group that is particularly popular. There were six groups run in the last financial year in Gungahlin, eight in Tuggeranong and seven in west Belconnen.

Cool Little Kids and the Mindful Motherhood program are very popular. The Learn and Grow playgroup programs across all centres are really popular as well. They are playgroup designed groups where the interaction between parents and children is really encouraged through that interactive play and child-led play process.

The child and family centres also have an intake, so you can turn up there at any time and go through an intake process. We also have drop-ins, through the Child Development Service. We run our speech pathology and physio drop-ins through the

child and family centres and they are very popular. I was out at west Belconnen this week, and on those dates when the drop-ins are on they are highly popular. A lot of people come. It is a great way to connect with families and connect some of the services that families are receiving across the board.

DR PATERSON: Are there waiting lists for any of these programs?

Mrs Summerrell: For the groups that are run through the child and family centres, I cannot categorically say there is no waiting list because if you walked into a centre today, mid-term, and you wanted to join one of the programs that was being run that is a term-based program, you would be put on the waiting list for the next term. But we are not carrying large waiting lists of people waiting to get onto those programs.

We do have some programs that are emerging as a little bit more popular, and this is a trend. We do not have enough data, but there is a program around managing and regularising behaviours and anxieties, and we have just seen through some intake numbers this week an increase in one of our centres around that particular program. I am not sure what will happen with those numbers; we are just looking at what that looks like for next term. There are certainly periods of time where different things are more popular. The playgroups and the parenting programs are a great service and a really great way to connect families into those services and support families that need it.

DR PATERSON: It sounds like you are pretty responsive to community need in those programs. If there is an area of need or connection or information needed, the government will respond to that.

Mrs Summerrell: Yes. We do our planning on a term-by-term basis, so if we are seeing really low numbers in one particular area and really high numbers in another area, or even across different centres—obviously the popularity of programs is different across different parts of the region—we are very agile in our planning, as we plan for the next term. We do incorporate other aspects. Next week is Indigenous Literacy Day, so part of the planning around term 3 has had a really strong focus on the parts of the programming that are flexible and respond to those things.

DR PATERSON: Great. Thank you.

MRS KIKKERT: This budget provides the Child Development Service with a funding increase of \$314,000. How much of this funding is earmarked for initiatives to help increase the likelihood of early diagnosis of ASD, as we agreed to in the Assembly last year?

Mrs Summerrell: Thanks very much for the question. Yes, the Child Development Service does continue to provide autism assessment for 0 to 12 years, through the Child Development Service that is run out of Holder. In the last financial year we did 128 assessments, through a hybrid model of telehealth and in person.

We use the funding that we have to conduct the assessments to deliver that hybrid model. That model has been very successful, and research has shown that using telehealth is a really successful way to deliver autism assessments. That has allowed our numbers to

continue. Adaptation to the changes that we have seen with COVID has also allowed us to have increased depth to our assessment process.

One of the challenges with COVID and autism assessments is that you cannot conduct an assessment while a child or young person is wearing a mask, so being able to do that via telehealth has been really successful. We will continue to deliver those assessments and that service throughout the next financial year, and we will do that through the funding profile that we have, by delivering through that hybrid model.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. Thank you. You mentioned telehealth. This question has nothing to do with telehealth, but ASDetect is an app that parents of babies to two years can use to detect if their child has autism. Do you keep data on how many parents are actually using this app?

Mrs Summerrell: I am not aware that we keep data from the app. However, the assessment process does take into consideration a range of observations that include parental observations, as well as information from a multidisciplinary team that goes towards that assessment process. How parents capture that information forms part of the provision of that parental information. I do not believe that we capture the method or the mechanism of how they are making those observations, if that makes sense.

MRS KIKKERT: Got it. Thanks.

Mrs Summerrell: No worries.

MRS KIKKERT: One priority in this budget is to continue to deliver the Children and Young People Equipment Loan Service. But table 20 on page 25 of budget statements G shows no ongoing funding for this program after this year. Will there be no need to purchase equipment in the future, either for increased amounts or to replace worn pieces?

Ms Rule: Mrs Kikkert, it is a really important program. In fact, I have accessed it recently for my own son, so it has been amazing to get out there and actually use one of our services. The money is to allow us to keep CAYPELS going while we look at the right funding model, going forward. CAYPELS is a really important service, but it is difficult to keep up the right level of stock and to predict demand for what kind of equipment is needed and what the model of replacement needs to be, because, as you can imagine, assistive technology evolves rapidly.

We are just doing some work on what the future funding basis for CAYPELS is, and we will go back to government with that discussion in future budgets. We are also having some discussions with the National Disability Insurance Agency. I have been told that around 50 to 60 per cent of loans in CAYPELS are from people trying equipment before they buy it for their children under the NDIS. I have raised that with the CEO of the NDIA, to have a discussion about how we can work together on that so that people can benefit from a loan scheme like CAYPELS but also to determine what is the funding source and what are the appropriate arrangements between what we can provide here in the ACT and what is provided for under the NDIS.

MRS KIKKERT: Is the provision of this service absorbed by the Child Development

Service or by another agency?

Ms Rule: It is run out of the Community Services Directorate. It is physically located in the same building as the Child Development Service at Holder.

MRS KIKKERT: At Holder.

Ms Rule: And run in the same part of the organisation.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. But it is not under the umbrella of the Child Development Service; it is just in the same building?

Ms Rule: It is all the Community Services Directorate. We run a whole range of programs. The Child Development Service is one; CAYPELS is another. They just happen to be located in the same place.

MRS KIKKERT: So if I were to look up the Child Development Service website, would this provision of service be included on that website?

Ms Rule: Probably, because it would be the Community Services Directorate website that you are looking at, so—

MRS KIKKERT: It is all under it.

Ms Rule: It would be on the same website in some way, shape or form. I am not sure. I have not looked it up myself. But it would be there. It is in the same part of the organisation, but they are separate programs, separate funding streams. Mrs Summerrell runs both of them. They are just different programs.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: That brings this session to a close. On behalf of the committee, I thank Minister Berry and officials for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, could you please provide answers to the committee secretary within five working days. The committee will now suspend for a short break.

Hearing suspended from 2.51 to 3.14 pm.

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to the final session of the Select Committee on Estimates hearings! I think I said that with a little too much enthusiasm, but it is our last session for these estimates. We will be hearing from the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development and officials. Welcome, Ms Berry and officials.

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 the words: "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.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. The first time you speak, can you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will go straight to questioning. I will give my first substantive question to Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I notice that on page 106 of budget statements E there is a decrease of \$168 million in the 2022-23 budget from the 2021-22 estimated outcome. It says:

- the decrease of \$168.824 million in the 2022–23 Budget from the 2021-22 Estimated Outcome is predominantly due to a decrease in land settlements in 2022-23 resulting from a low stock level. There were strong market demands throughout 2021–22, which resulted in all land ready blocks being sold

Minister, do you anticipate similar market demands this financial year, and how will this low stock level affect the housing market?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question, Mr Cain. I do not know that we can predict what is going to happen in the future. That is a bit of hypothesising. I might ask Mr Dietz to talk through what we know. But it is a bit of hypothesising.

MR CAIN: Perhaps Mr Dietz can also cover: will there be ample stock level next financial year?

Mr Dietz: I definitely can. Thank you, Mr Cain. I have read and understood the privilege statement. Firstly, in describing why the budget talks of lower stock levels next year, it is worth talking about what the interpretation of higher stock levels has been in the last year or two. Under our minister's expectation, it is our requirement to continue to deliver land over all cycles of the property cycle. That meant that it was only three years ago that we had 600 blocks available over the counter that people had not purchased. Even two years ago that was in the 400s or thereabouts.

When demand did pick up, as part of the economic cycle or the housing cycle, we had significant stock that had been produced in years prior that was able to be sold. That then significantly reduced the pressure on the spike in demand that was brought about through COVID. But it did mean that over that time we had two years—the last year and the year prior—where our revenues were significant because stock that we had in the previous years was being sold.

Last year, as well, some of our stock—for all the right reasons, actually—was sold a little bit earlier than we had budgeted for next year. So when we talk of lower stock levels, we continue to release to the ILRP. We suspect that demand will be reduced from where it has been in the last two years, given where we are at in the economic cycle. Therefore, our budget reflects both the amount of stock we have to sell and the demand that the economy will bring.

MR CAIN: What actions is the SLA taking to increase the number of land-ready blocks in time for next financial year?

Mr Dietz: We are delivering to the indicative land release program.

MR CAIN: And you think it is appropriate that the SLA does not have an adequate number of land-ready blocks available, because this tends to inflate the market, in the midst of a housing crisis?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question, Mr Cain. Some of these questions go to the minister for planning. The indicative land release program is the program that is released by the planning minister that gives an indication of the land release—

MR CAIN: But those targets are rarely met.

THE CHAIR: We might just let the minister respond.

Ms Berry: We ask the Suburban Land Agency to deliver that land and prepare it for sale and for build. I think the questions that you are asking about the numbers on the indicative land release program should have been asked of Mr Gentleman. The Suburban Land Agency is the delivering arm of the government, of the land, and works to deliver and release land in the indicative land program as it is released by the government.

MS CLAY: Minister, the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment has just released a state of the waterways report, and one of her recommendations was that EPSDD and TCCS, in consultation with the SLA, “should develop a range of stormwater management solutions for new estates and subdivisions, in the context of a catchment-wide plan for the area, to ensure that the optimal solution and the means of financing it are adopted”. I understand that that has probably come up in the context of a lot of concern about runoff and the impact of ongoing development on our waterways. What is the response on that? Are we doing anything in that area?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question, Ms Clay. I will ask Mr Dietz to provide a little bit of detail or pass it on.

Mr Dietz: I will pass this on to Simon Tennent, who is in charge of Molonglo, where we did work very closely with the auditors of the waterways report. In working very closely I was very happy that we were able to provide a lot of information to that report. There was an episode, a year or two ago, when there was a substantial rain event where significant lessons were learnt.

To be honest, I was a little bit disappointed. Some of the things that we have done since that point in time to improve—and we are now industry-leading in our waterways management—did not quite get into the report. I might hand to Mr Simon Tennent to talk through some of the things that we have already done as part of the lessons learned when that rain event did happen and how we intended to react to the action of the report.

Mr Tennent: Thank you, John. I have read and understood the privilege statement. The

state of the waterways report did not come as a surprise to us. The information in it, particularly the catchment studies around Deep Creek and the focus on Whitlam, is information that we were well and truly aware of. It was a little disappointing that the case study ended in the year 2020, and did not acknowledge some of the significant work and programs that we put in place with our contractors and our internal staff to do much better, particularly in the management of water runoff and erosion.

The report goes into a fair bit of detail about the scouring and the erosion that occurred in Deep Creek in 2020. That came after two years of what were relatively dry conditions. We had full environmental approval. All of our construction approvals had associated sediment control plans in place, and we followed those right to the letter. It became apparent very quickly, from those really large rain events in 2020, that they just were not up to it. So we chased our tail a little bit following stage 1, but we acted very quickly in stage 2. We commissioned, in partnership with EPSDD, the Whitlam water quality project. That is a joint agency and directorate project with the natural resource management team. It gets our contractors on board as well.

Basically, it says that business-as-usual is not going to cut it anymore. We need to try our hardest. The Whitlam water quality project has now been in place for the best part of two years, and the changes in the water quality, and sediment and erosion control have been quite considerable. The monitoring that was reported in the state of the waterways report finished in 2020. We have actually chipped in; we are now funding the monitoring at Deep Creek, and the results that we have been getting, particularly in these recent rain events, have been far better when it comes to suspended solids and turbidity. So, there is some quantitative data that shows that there have been some improvements, but we never stop learning. Even yesterday—our rain from a couple of weeks ago; I think it was 80 or 100 millilitres in 24 hours—saw some sediment coming off stage 3 going into the Namarag nature reserve. We have acted very quickly. We are working with the Parks and Conservation team down there. We are actually remediating the sediment that has gone in there. We have already built 75 per cent of a pretty considerable sediment-retaining basin at the bottom.

So, we have been responding quite actively since 2020—they were quite shocking pictures that we saw in the report—and I believe that, based on the quantitative reporting that we are getting from our estate in Whitlam, we have seen quite substantial improvements.

MS CLAY: Do you publish that data?

Mr Tennent: We have not published it yet, for no other reason that we have just been working with the natural resource management team. They are the ones collecting the data and they are the ones providing it to us, but that certainly can be made available.

MS CLAY: It might be an excellent idea if it could be. Thank you.

DR PATERSON: Minister, this morning I spoke with Minister Vassarotti around wombats in Molonglo Valley. There are concerns from wombat groups that there are wombats in burrows that are being either crushed by machinery or buried. What is being done to ensure, when the land is being cleared, that there are no live wombats in burrows?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question. Of course, it is very important, when we are building and developing land, that we make sure that we take into account some of the residents who might have been there before us, and that includes wombats and other native flora and fauna. Significant work is done prior to machinery rolling in, around understanding who is there and—knowing that we are obviously going to be moving animals into different homes—making sure that we are not injuring or endangering them any further whilst we are doing the development.

Mr Tennent: As part of normal estate development all of the due diligence that occurs prior to any machine getting near site does include significant ecological surveys—not just the native grass, the pink-tailed worm-lizard habitat and the tree values, but certainly the wildlife that exists within. That is carefully understood before we get on site, and measures are usually put in place to relocate any wildlife that we find. When our civil contractors do their very first scrape of the land, when they start to put aside the rocks and the topsoil, they are also carefully briefed about looking out for wildlife as well. I have not actually seen or heard of any instance where we have lost any wildlife from our development out in Whitlam, and I believe the measures we have got in place are ensuring the perseveration of those animals.

DR PATERSON: Have any wombats been relocated in the Molonglo Valley and through any of the suburbs that have developed there?

Mr Tennent: I can only speak for Whitlam—only because that coincides with my time in the role. There were not wombat burrows in Whitlam. There are, however, some wombat burrows in the Molonglo Group Centre as well as Coombs Peninsula. So, we do know where they are, and we work very carefully with our Parks and Conservation colleagues, to know exactly where the wildlife is, prior to us getting on site.

Ms Berry: I might just add to that. I understand that there is concern from the group Wombat Rescue about the possibility that there may have been wombats living on that site prior to its development. I have not been aware of that but, as I said, the Suburban Land Agency and the contractors check very carefully to ensure that if wildlife is found it is relocated. Nobody wants to see wildlife being injured or dying as a result of development. We know that development does impact on the environment. That is the kind of conflict that we have to try and manage, making sure that we have homes for people but also making sure that we retain as much as we can of our environmentally and culturally significant places across the city. I might take part of that question on notice, Mr Tennent, to see if we can provide clearer information—if it is not us, then it is another directorate—around where wombats are living, and, if we know about them, what we are doing to manage their cohabitation with humans.

MS CLAY: Did you just say that you can develop a whole suburb without losing any wildlife at all?

Mr Tennent: No, I did not say that.

MS CLAY: Excellent. I misheard you; my apologies. I now have a substantive question. Minister, the SLA's non-financial performance is measured by placing achievement against certain targets for the release of residential, commercial, industrial and

community lands, as defined in the ILRP. There is also performance against targets in table 6 in the budget. I am just trying to work out whether the SLA is measuring performance against the parliamentary target of 70 per cent infill. Is that in the budget?

Ms Berry: Yes; we can talk to that.

Mr Dietz: The policy of 70 per cent infill is implicit within the ILRP. As part of the ILRP being designed, they are looking to ensure that the land that we release is to the requirements of government, being 70:30. Our role then is to deliver the ILRP. So, the ILRP for this year I think is thereabouts—70:30—and I believe that, over the time since the SLA has been involved, it has been roughly that.

MS CLAY: Is it reported against it in the budget? We had a bit of a look and could not see it.

Mr Dietz: I would probably have to check to see if we specifically report what is 70 and what is 30, as opposed to what is for multi-unit and what is for residential. I think that, at that level, of what is single residential as opposed to multi-unit, it is a very good reflection of what the 70:30 reflection is.

MS CLAY: How would someone like me check? Where is the information?

Ms Berry: I suggest that that might be something that is collected in the planning space.

Mr Dietz: I think that is right; the minister is correct. We report on exactly which blocks we deliver against the ILRP. It is probably then the ILRP and the policy that sits behind the ILRP, which needs to ensure that it is meeting the policy of 70:30. Perhaps it is outside of the SLA's remit to have that.

MS CLAY: Sure. It is a question for the planning minister?

Ms Berry: Yes.

MR CAIN: I refer, Minister, to page 89 of budget statements D. I note on that on that page it says that key land developments for 2022-23 are listed in Molonglo Valley; Gungahlin; Ginninderry; and urban infill sites, including Belconnen, Kingston, Oaks Estate and Phillip. Minister, given there was a low stock level of land-ready blocks last year, is this a way of looking to increase the number of key land developments over the coming year? If so, where?

Mr Dietz: The answer is similar to before. We will be delivering to the ILRP. The ILRP, over the coming years, does have some significantly increased land delivery areas—namely, Jacka 2, which is a new suburb and will be delivered by the SLA, and Kenny, a new suburb that will be delivered by the SLA. That is reflected in the ILRP.

MR CAIN: What input do you have on the upcoming ILRPs?

Mr Dietz: It is a process which is managed by EPSDD and approved by the Minister for Planning and Land Management through a cabinet process. We have collaborative input, working closely with our colleagues at EPSDD, as part of the consultation

process.

MR CAIN: So, you do have some responsibility for what is being offered in the indicative land release program?

Ms Berry: No. The role of the Suburban Land Agency is the delivery arm of land development, not the land release itself.

MR CAIN: Minister, I have a supplementary question. When will the greenfield land supply be exhausted in Gungahlin?

Ms Berry: After Kenny, I believe. It more a question of planning.

MR CAIN: You have no knowledge of that or an answer to it? We do have the Chief Planner here, as well.

Mr Ponton: The last suburb to be released is, in fact, Kenny, as the minister said. The releases in Kenny are identified within the current indicative land release program, but that does not incorporate all of Kenny. In terms of the final dates, that is a responsibility of the Minister for Planning. Whilst I am here today to support Minister Berry in relation to those portfolio responsibilities relating to housing policy, that is a matter that should be directed to the Minister for Planning and Land Management.

MR CAIN: You would know in what year Gungahlin greenfield will be exhausted. You must know the answer to that.

Mr Ponton: Again, that would be a question for the Minister for Planning and Land Management.

MR CAIN: Can the minister for the Suburban Land Agency ask the Chief Planner to answer that question, please?

Ms Berry: No. I am sorry, Mr Cain; we were invited here to respond to questions within my portfolio areas, not within another minister's portfolio areas. If you have a question for another minister, then you need to ask that question of another minister. I understand that the reason estimates has been set up this way this time—with so many of us here across portfolios—is so that, as much as possible, we can cover those questions. We will do our very best, but it is not my responsibility or the responsibility of witnesses who are here today to respond to questions of other portfolio ministers.

MR CAIN: But he could if he wanted to, and if you approved that, surely. He doesn't have amnesia, does he?

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, do you have a different supplementary that you would like to ask?

MR CAIN: I do. What consultation has the SLA conducted with residents of Oaks Estate with regard to future developments?

Mr Dietz: Thank you, Mr Cain, for the question. I will hand over to Tom Gordon, who,

I believe, has some information on our consultation. I also note that the assurance package, which is provided to us by EPSDD, has been provided relatively recently. There is an amount of consultation which occurs within EPSDD initially, and then we take over that consultation. From our point of view, Tom will probably be able to talk through the consultation that the SLA has done. That would be great.

Mr Gordon: We have Irena Sharp, who can talk directly to it, but, as you said—

THE CHAIR: Just acknowledge the privilege statement, please.

Mr Gordon: Sorry. I acknowledge that I have read the statement. As you said, John, the EPSDD has undertaken all of the due diligence on it. A lot of consultation was undertaken then and presented to the SLA. Irena can talk directly to that.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

Ms Sharp: I have read and understood the privilege statement. The Oaks Estate sites were on the indicative land release program last year, and they are on the program this year as well. The reason is that they have some continued due diligence work that needs to be completed. So, they were not released last year, and we are planning to do so this year as that due diligence work is finalised. We have not necessarily undertaken community engagement processes, other than to indicate that sites are coming up for release.

MR CAIN: Could you explain the extent of the consultation you have done with that community?

Ms Sharp: It was an information-only type of consultation. There were letters sent out to highlight that sites are identified on the indicative land release program and that the Suburban Land Agency will be releasing them.

DR PATERSON: Can I please make a comment?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

DR PATERSON: Mr Cain is a visitor to this committee. Can you please ensure that, in further questioning, he is respectful to the witnesses this committee has sought.

THE CHAIR: Yes; absolutely.

MR PARTON: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I want to ask you about the major shortfall in what your government has promised to spend in the housing space compared to what has actually been appropriated. We all know that there has been a lot of discussion about this in recent weeks based on analysis by Dr Khalid Ahmed and former Chief Minister Jon Stanhope. You responded to the claims from Ahmed, Stanhope and the Canberra Liberals by saying that we had misread the information and, specifically, that we had not taken into account the money from the sale of a number of ageing public housing complexes specifically linked to the commonwealth asset recycling initiative.

The direct quote from the Riotact article is:

... the initial public housing renewal program was based on the asset recycling program—a scheme under which the ACT Government sold off public housing sites to get a 15 per cent bonus from the Commonwealth and then reinvested that money into the construction and purchase of new houses.

Minister, if we use the facts available, it is pretty clear that all of the money from the sale of the assets that you speak of went to the light rail project. That is clearly articulated in several publicly available documents. I have in front of me schedule A, the National Partnership Agreement on Asset Recycling. It is probably a little odd for a visiting member of a committee to do so, but I understand that I can table this document, and I would like to table this document.

THE CHAIR: Is the committee happy to accept that as an exhibit?

MR BRADDOCK: Sorry; what exactly is this document?

MR PARTON: This is a document that was signed by the then federal Treasurer Scott Morrison and the Chief Minister Andrew Barr. It is the National Partnership Agreement on Asset Recycling with regard to what was sold from the ACT and where the money went.

MR BRADDOCK: It would probably be fine to accept it as an exhibit.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we can accept it—moved by Mr Braddock—as an exhibit.

MR PARTON: This document very clearly shows that all moneys from the sale of the Northbourne flats at Braddon, Northbourne flats at Turner, Bega Court at Braddon, Currong and Eloura apartments at Braddon, Gowrie Court at Narrabundah, Red Hill flats, Strathgordon Court at Lyons and Stuart flats at Griffith, very clearly shows that all of the money from the sale of housing assets and the commonwealth's 15 per cent top-up went to the light rail project. That is what it says on every line. That is also reflected in the review of the National Partnership on Asset Recycling from January of 2019. Yet, minister, you are on the public record very recently on a number of occasions claiming that that is not the case. It leads me to only two conclusions: either that you have no idea how and where money is spent under your portfolio umbrella, or that you have misled the public with those recent statements. Can I ask you to clarify which one of those conclusions is correct?

Ms Berry: Thanks, Mr Parton. Actually, my clarification to you and to the media was the story behind the asset recycling program, which was not my portfolio responsibility when it was initially introduced as part of the public housing growth and renewal program in the ACT. You have provided a lot of thoughts leading up to your question and I will ask Ms Gilding to take you through the previous program and this program, so that there is a clear understanding of the funding being spent and the houses being built, as was required under the previous public housing growth and renewal program, and, as part of that, the asset recycling agreement. I will also ask her to take you through the difference between that program and this new program of growth and renewal, because they are different funding buckets, but they all are funded by the ACT

government.

Ms Gilding: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I am going to talk about the previous program from the point of view of Housing ACT and note that the asset recycling initiative was led by treasury, but also that the sales and the development were led by the former EPSDD taskforce.

For our part, we received 1,288 brand new two-bedroom units—a roof-for-roof replacement for all of the stock out of those 13 multi-unit properties. That stock better suited the needs of tenants. I do not know if you have had the privilege, Mr Parton, of visiting some of the older properties, with their boiler basements and their flooded areas, in terms of the heating and the cooling and the inefficient ways those houses operated.

From Housing ACT's point of view, budget funding was appropriated to build 1,288 brand new two-bedroom units across the city. Once we had received those properties and we had relocated tenants from each of the multiunit properties over a period of time, we then did an equity transfer of that asset to Economic Development and EPSDD—there was an entity change at some point in time there—and they then undertook a sales program. From there, treasury had the lead on the asset recycle renewal.

MR PARTON: Can I just seek a further clarification. You have told me about these 1,288 new properties that have been built, but it is impossible to argue against the document that has been tabled. The minister has come out and stated very clearly that the sales of these ageing complexes and the asset recycling initiative money has gone back into public housing, and it has not. It has gone to light rail. It is in black and white that it has gone to light rail. So, Minister, how can you say that that is not the case? I just do not understand that.

Ms Berry: I might just have to try to locate the actual reference that you are making in the hearing today—

MR PARTON: The reference is to your media statements.

Ms Berry: —so that I can understand, because the context might be being misconstrued deliberately by you, Mr Parton. What I have consistently said is that the replacement program was very clear. In the government's agreement under the asset recycling initiative, we needed to replace, roof for roof, 1,288 properties. And we did that. As for the sale of the properties that tenants were living in—and they were relocated into the new properties—that was within the EPSDD, and part of that sale was going to the 15 per cent as part of the asset recycling initiative. That is something probably you need to direct to the Chief Minister, because he—

MR PARTON: But, Minister, you are the one who has come out and said something. I have the statement in front of me. The quote is from the *RiotACT*, so I am assuming it comes from a communication that has come from your office. It says:

According to the government, the Liberals have made at least two significant errors.

First, the initial public housing renewal program was based on the asset recycling program – a scheme under which the ACT Government sold off public housing

sites ...

It goes on to say that with a 15 per cent bonus from the Commonwealth that money was reinvested “into the construction and purchase of new houses”—and it was not. It is abundantly clear that it was not. Indeed, if it was invested in new houses, it would suggest that you have—dare I say it?—torn up the contract in terms of the agreement signed by Andrew Barr and Scott Morrison. Every single line about these ageing public housing complexes and their sale—every single line!—said that the money went to Canberra Metro: 100 per cent. It says, “Proportion of sale proceeds of net assets to be invested in the agreed infrastructure investment—100 per cent.” How is it that as the minister overseeing this, you can possibly go out to the public in the last four weeks and say that the money from this program has gone to public housing? It has not.

Ms Berry: Mr Parton, thank you for the party, but you suggested that the ACT government had transferred money from the public housing project to light rail. That is not the case. We set out to renew 1,288 properties, which you and your political party opposed, and you were one of the people—

MR PARTON: Let us—

Ms Berry: No, you are interrupting me.

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton.

MR PARTON: That is not what we are talking about, Minister. That is not what we are talking about.

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton, can we please just allow the minister to respond for now.

Ms Berry: You have been continually suggesting that the ACT government has somehow magicked up public housing properties with no money. Of course we have spent the money and delivered, as we were required to do, as part of the asset recycling initiative, which was not part of my portfolio responsibilities. So, if you are referring specifically to that, you need to talk with the Treasurer.

MR PARTON: Well, you should not refer to it in statements so—

Ms Berry: On public housing, Mr Parton—

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton.

Ms Berry: We set out to renew 1,288 properties under the last program and this is exactly what we did, despite the opposition of your political party—

MR PARTON: And what about the growth part? We are not talking about Liberal policy here; we are talking about you delivering your promises.

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton.

Ms Berry: —to delivering public housing in the ACT. We did it more cheaply than we

thought we would, and we invested more of those funds into the future program of renewal. We can talk in more detail about the renewal program and how we are delivering for ACT.

MR PARTON: I think I have heard enough, Minister. Thank you.

Ms Berry: Yes, you probably need to go.

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton, please just be quiet until the minister has—

DR PATERSON: Can we please ensure that visitors are respectful to witnesses.

THE CHAIR: Yes. I have called on Mr Parton to be quiet while the minister responded.

MR CAIN: Does that include Ms Clay?

I have a supplementary question. Minister, do you stand by the quotes that have been reported in the media in the last short period?

DR PATERSON: Chair, the minister has already answered this question.

THE CHAIR: Do you have anything further to add to that question?

Ms Berry: I do not think I can. I think Mr Cain has—

MR CAIN: You cannot answer the question?

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain.

Ms Berry: Seriously!

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, can you please give the minister an opportunity to respond to your supplementary question.

Ms Berry: Thank you for that. I do not think I can provide any more detail than I already have, but I think Mr Ponton might be able to provide some more information which might be helpful for Mr Parton and Mr Cain.

THE CHAIR: If we can hear Mr Ponton's response in silence, that would be appreciated.

MR CAIN: I have a point of order. I simply asked: does the minister stand by the media quotes over the last short period on this topic? That is the question.

THE CHAIR: The minister has responded to that, and the minister has also decided to call on an official to add further comment to your supplementary, which we will allow.

Mr Ponton: Thank you, Chair. I realise that I did not previously acknowledge the privilege statement, so I will do that now.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr Ponton: I think it is the third or fourth time today that I have done that, but, nevertheless, I will. I thought it might be useful if I might add to this in terms of this perhaps going around a little bit. I appreciate what you are saying, Mr Parton, in relation to the specific agreement. It has been some time since I have had a chance to talk about at that. I think it was in about 2016 or 2017—

MR PARTON: Yes, it was.

Mr Ponton: —that I last had a chance to review that document, so it would be useful if I could refresh my memory, but, as the minister said, that was linked to the renewal program. As I recall it, that program previously was not renewal and growth; that is the current program. Very specifically, as part of the mix, there was a requirement that if those assets—that is, the public housing—were sold, it would be renewed with up-to-date, modern development. Therefore, through EPSDD we did manage that program and we did deliver on the 1,288 replacement dwellings. I appreciate what you are saying in terms of the sale then being managed through—and it actually went to—treasury consolidated revenue, and that then the government made decisions about the allocations. So, in some respects, without wanting to be unhelpful, I think it is about accounting. I wonder whether, Minister, we could take that on notice and provide a little bit more detail in terms of how all those various pieces fit together. That might be useful.

Ms Berry: I think that might be the case. Even though I think we have provided a fair amount of detail in response to the media, of course they do not always report everything that we provide in terms of accounting. My recollection—and it was a while ago and it was not my responsibility at the time—is that the program, my part of it, was to provide the 1,288 properties. And that is what we did.

DR PATERSON: I have a substantive question.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we will go to the next substantive question. There is more opportunity; we have plenty of time this afternoon.

DR PATERSON: Minister, the government is investing an extra \$57.2 million in the budget on public housing repairs and maintenance this year. How will this funding help the maintenance teams?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question. The funding is significant. It will greatly assist our teams in Housing to be able to provide maintenance for our public housing properties. We have seen over the last couple of years the difference that has made to people's lives, with respect to making sure that people have good and decent homes to live in. That has been an important part of our maintenance program.

Also, it is an important part of the public housing growth and renewal program. We have some of the oldest properties in the country and, by renewing those homes, we are providing better homes that meet people's needs and suit people's lives. It also means that they have good homes, we have less ageing housing stock, and we can respond to maintenance issues quickly. I will ask Ms Loft to provide some detail about the program.

Ms Loft: I acknowledge that I have read and understood the privilege statement. I manage the contract for maintenance with Programmed. A lot of strategy and significant effort go into the planning. Last year it was over \$80 million in about six or seven months because of COVID. This year we looked at the appropriation that we were given and at how we could get not only best value for money, but the most important aspects of renewing the condition of properties within the portfolio.

We work alongside Programmed with what we call our property condition audits. That is data collected no less than every four years on the wet areas, kitchens and bathrooms. We record that, along with our housing managers and subcontractors. Every time they go out to a property, they will look at any maintenance that is required. We will add that into our data systems and work on a forward annual program with the supplier, with Programmed.

Normally, we would sit at a 70-30 split, regarding responsive to capital. With the increased funding, we have increased that to 84 per cent. We are trying to ensure that some of the major items in households are being addressed. For example, last year there were over 49,000 work orders. Of that, 15,000 were capital works. To give you some idea, that was 195 kitchen upgrades—that is 182 properties, 238 properties got wet area upgrades, there were 200 properties with domestic violence works, nearly 400 with disability modifications, over 1,000 internal paints, and over 400 roofing upgrades.

This is where we prioritise, and we have sophisticated data and systems to record that. When a property becomes vacant, we have also established an asset assessment panel. Internally, we will have a look not only from the client's perspective but from the asset's perspective, and bring that together and look at all of the different aspects of the property and try to make a well-rounded decision. All of that is fed back into the planning.

DR PATERSON: What difference have these maintenance projects made to people's lives?

Ms Loft: Definitely, we are seeing, with the upgrades, that there are fewer maintenance issues for them. We have done a lot of energy efficiency work through replacing gas with electric appliances, to try to reduce their heating and cooling bills. It is about simply increasing their standard of living. We have definitely seen that through not only the trends but also the volume of complaints that Housing ACT manage. There has been a reduction. It is less than one per cent of Housing-managed maintenance complaints on the work orders. It is pretty outstanding. You could say that that is a 99 per cent success rate.

MR PARTON: I missed some of the detail of Ms Loft's earlier answer. We are currently asking about this, through the minister's office. Indeed there have been some questions about this project. We were told that you guys are in the process of providing an instrument so that we would have a 70-30 split on that money. That is part of what you ran through there in that answer, isn't it? The rest of it would go to general repairs.

The \$80 million budgeted in 2021-22 was across three years. My understanding is that it was split into \$40 million, \$20 million and \$20 million. In the 2022-23 budget there is an additional \$57 million announced for 2022-23, with money being brought forward

from 2022-23 and 2023-24. Can you outline exactly how much money was spent in 2021-22 under this program and how much is budgeted in the following two years?

That is my question: can you outline exactly how much was spent under this program in 2021-22 and, for the following two years, how much is budgeted? I do not know whether that is an on-notice scenario or whether it is something that someone can answer.

Ms Loft: I can talk to some of that detail, Mr Parton. Housing ACT had \$82.348 million of repairs and maintenance committed or expended at 30 June 2022. Of this, expenditure of \$77.291 million has been incurred. That means filled, complete; and \$5.057 million has been committed to works in progress. We were able to spend it and bring that money forward; the \$57 million is budgeted for this year.

MR PARTON: Why wasn't the original amount enough? Why did it have to be topped up?

Ms Loft: If my recollection serves me right, last year you said that we did not spend enough money in maintenance.

MR PARTON: Yes, but I am—

Ms Loft: I think the government has heard, and has very generously appropriated, and we were able to spend that money, so the need is definitely there.

MR PARTON: But why was it topped up additionally to that appropriation? My understanding, based on what I can read in these budget papers, is that it was topped up additionally to that extra appropriation.

Ms Gilding: Perhaps I could answer Mr Parton's question. You are talking about the original appropriation being \$40 million and that being topped up.

MR PARTON: Yes.

Ms Gilding: If we look at the 2021-22 year, there were a lot of unknown variables, if we cast our minds back, in terms of the pandemic, global supply chains, material supply, labour supply and wet weather. The initial appropriation of \$40 million was provisioned based on forecasts of what we needed. Government do not like to over-appropriate or give you more than you need, but they also said, "If you spend the \$40 million, you can bring forward the rest of it." That is where you see that we managed to get \$77 million out the door and another \$5 million committed. Work does not stop on 30 June for us, and that is why there is that differential in those rolling numbers.

This year we have seen another \$57 million appropriated, and we will add that \$5 million extra from the \$77 million, so \$82 million minus \$77 million is the \$5 million, and that will end up being expended in the current financial year, topping that up to just over \$60 million in maintenance for the coming year as well.

MS CLAY: Minister, one of our parliamentary and governing agreement commitments is to further refine land sale processes and examine whether any amendment to land

sales legislation is necessary to allow major sites to be released for high-quality purposes and not just to the highest financial bidder. Can you tell me whether you have determined whether we need to make legislative changes to implement that?

Ms Berry: We are already implementing that, and we were implementing it before the parliamentary and governing agreement, so it confirms what the Suburban Land Agency was already doing. I can ask Mr Dietz to respond to that.

Mr Dietz: Some of the initiatives that we have in play there are specifically around place-making. Our minister, through her expectations of the SLA from the day dot, has wanted us to ensure that we work with all stakeholders to fully understand what the best or the most optimised solution is for a development.

That has been taken on by our board, our executive and our full team, to bring place-making to the core of the way that we deliver. That ensures that when we look at a development, a block of land or something that we need to release to the market, we sit down with all stakeholders and with the community to fully understand the history of that block of land, how it was used, how it is currently being used, and then understand the vision for that site. In understanding the vision, we work with the community to fully document and define that vision, because that becomes for us what success looks like for the community.

That allows us to ensure we can choose a methodology of release and we can tender against that definition. In the past perhaps that methodology had not been used as much as it is now. Since the SLA has been in play, we have made that core to our business. Gold Creek was probably one of the first where we used that approach, but now it is being used in Belconnen, Moncrieff, Taylor, Whitlam, Coombs and Wright. It is starting to get some much better outcomes for the delivery of land that we release.

MS CLAY: I am familiar with the place-making process. We have heard about this before. It is good to hear. The question is: have we done an analysis to decide if we need to make any legislative changes? Do we need to change any of our legislative settings to make sure that we are doing that universally and on every single sale?

Mr Ponton: That is a matter for the planning minister. I can say, though, in drafting the planning bill, that certainly was considered. We have worked with our colleagues in the Suburban Land Agency to explore with them what they are currently doing under the existing provisions. I can say this because the draft is out; people have had the chance to review this. You would have noticed that there is nothing specific about this, because the current provisions, as Mr Dietz has confirmed, allow for this to be dealt with more appropriately through our project deeds and contracts, which is the way that it is currently being dealt with. The short answer is yes, we have, and no, we do not need to make any further changes.

MS CLAY: Excellent. We heard a similar answer once before in estimates. We took it back to the office and tried to work out how we would determine whether all of our blocks actually were being sold for the highest quality purpose, not to the highest bidder. The only way we could think about it was to go through and analyse the individual sales contract for each block. Is there any overarching analysis taking place to make sure that every single block is going to the highest quality bidder? Are we reporting against this?

Mr Dietz: We do rely on our internal processes within the SLA. We have a standard operating procedure which guides us as to which blocks require which type of methodology to be released. We have a revenue and release committee, which is run by the executive. When we do receive the new ILRP, we ensure that we look through that to define which blocks have the best outcome based on the methodology of release. Whether there is a higher level summary of all of those, it would probably take some analysis to define that historically.

MS CLAY: It is not reported anywhere; you have to look at each one individually and try and assess it?

Mr Dietz: That is reflective of our process, in that we do look at each one individually to decide what is the best methodology of release for that block.

MS CLAY: No, not you, Mr Dietz, not for the SLA, but for a member of the public or somebody else who was interested to see whether this process is working. It is not reported against, anywhere?

Ms Berry: It is through the development application process and through the requests for tender and those processes. Any member of the public can have a look and see what it is at; they might be interested in purchasing a property themselves. Through that, it is identified on the requirements for that particular piece of land.

Mr Dietz: As the minister says, it is definitely publicly available information on every block. We do not provide it in a summarised version.

MR CAIN: Minister, does the SLA maintain an interests register for senior staff and their partners or spouses; if not, why not?

Ms Berry: They do.

MR CAIN: Are staff required to declare gifts such as dinners, cruises, golf days and conferences received from suppliers? Can you table the relevant policy, please?

Mr Dietz: The answer is yes, we do. There is a relevant policy, which is a government policy, and we share that policy under the EPSDD umbrella. I do not have it here for tabling, but I can take it on notice and table that policy.

MR CAIN: Thank you. On how many occasions were gifts as I have just described declared in 2021-22?

Mr Dietz: To the best of my knowledge, the answer is zero. I do have that information here, and I could quickly grab it.

Ms Berry: Take it on notice for a moment.

Mr Dietz: I am happy to take that on notice.

MR CAIN: Why did you say the answer was zero?

Ms Berry: We are taking it on notice for the moment to clarify it for you, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: Have there been any instances where staff have been found not to have declared gifts, and what action was taken in such a case?

Mr Dietz: There are no instances that have come to my attention or that of my governance team where an employee has failed to follow that process.

MR CAIN: What training do staff receive on what constitutes a gift that should be declared?

Mr Dietz: The agency has conflict of interest and fraud-type training. We ensure that that is available to all staff. Given the importance of that training, our board has identified that as a KPI to ensure that we deliver it to all staff. You will note in our statement of intent that we have a KPI of ensuring that 90 per cent of all staff have that training, if they were here within six months of the end of the financial year. Our current understanding of how we delivered against that last year, which is yet to be audited, is that it sits at 99 per cent of all staff having had that training.

MR PARTON: I have some questions on the infamous growth and renewal relocation letters. Minister, can you update us on how many people in that process have, I am assuming at its conclusion, agreed to relocate, from the 300 letters sent? How many have applied for exemption? How many received an exemption? How many have just said that they refuse to move?

Ms Berry: Mr Parton, I will see whether Mr Aigner has some of that information, if it is available.

Mr Aigner: Thank you for the question, Mr Parton. I have read the privilege statement and understand it. In the program, as at August, we have engaged with roughly 735 tenants. We have relocated 388; we are approaching 400 relocations, which is great news for the program. Mr Parton, I think you asked how many have refused to relocate so far. That number sits at around 148. There have been 62 exemption requests submitted, of which we have heard 22 so far. So roughly a third have been heard by our tenant relocation exemption panel, and 15 of the 22 exemptions that we have heard have been approved.

MR PARTON: For those that have been granted an exemption, for the purposes of the mathematics of this program, will you be finding new properties to make up for those properties that are now no longer on the program? Is that how it will work?

Ms Gilding: Yes, we work very closely with the relocations team. That is identified early. Sometimes it is through the design process, and we will then work for a substitution for that stock, absolutely.

MR PARTON: Finally, Minister, why did you move away from voluntary inclusion to forced relocations in this program?

Ms Berry: Both programs—both growth and renewal programs—required people to

move so that we could build more homes and better homes.

MR PARTON: But in the initial stages, people were told, “This is potentially going to happen and we’d like you to be involved if you could be.” It changed to, “You are involved, whether you like it or not.”

Ms Berry: I can ask Ms Gilding to provide a little bit more information to you on the reasons why.

MR PARTON: Surely, as minister, you can tell us why you moved away from voluntary inclusion to a forced relocation. Surely, that has come down to some ministerial oversight.

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton, the minister has decided to ask an official to respond to your question.

Ms Gilding: Thank you for the question. Moving is hard for anybody. At the beginning of the growth and renewal program, we wanted to work with those people who wanted to move first. As you can see, a large percentage of tenants put their hands up and said that, yes, they wanted to move. In order to deliver the volume and pace of development sites, and sales to fund that development, we needed to take a different approach to the program. I will ask Mr Aigner to step through the number of different ways we have worked with tenants in terms of the program and encouraging people to move as part of it.

Mr Aigner: Mr Parton, you may remember from the briefing in March, earlier this year, that we talked about the number of phases that we had in this program. The required relocation phase that we are in at the moment is what we are calling the fourth phase. We went through three phases before that. The first phase was just casting a wide net, seeing who would engage with us, and engaging with anyone who had come through the multi-criteria analysis that Ms Loft’s team had conducted. That did not yield a high success rate. We moved on to a second stage of the program where we tried to build what we called the theory of the tenancy, to look at how we could engage people and gauge their interest. That moved the dial a little bit but not a lot.

The third phase was where we took on a bit more of a proactive marketing approach. We were staging properties, furnishing them and trying to attract people into the program like a private real estate agent would. That also moved the dial a little bit, but it never got us over the 46 per cent mark. That was the prompt for us to move to what we are calling phase 4 of the program.

MR CAIN: Minister, who made the decision to move away from voluntary inclusion to forced relocations?

Ms Berry: I think it has been explained just now by Mr Aigner, around the growth and renewal, and why we have needed to move to a different way of asking people to leave their homes and to move into other homes that better suit their needs. We have a process for going through that. I understand Mr Parton has been briefed in quite a lot of detail about that. We can provide even more information today on the program. It is about making sure that we renew public housing that better suits the needs of our existing

tenants and improves the age of our public housing stock, which is some of the oldest in the country, and ensuring that public housing meets the needs of our tenants now and into the future.

We have a range of circumstances. Some tenants are living in properties by themselves. Those properties may be larger properties, whereas those individuals can have properties that better suit their needs, sometimes in the same suburb or at least in the same area, and we can build even more public housing properties through the sale or the redevelopment of those older or larger public housing sites.

This is about making sure that we can provide the best possible outcomes to tenants, because we are not completely ignorant of the fact that it is difficult to move, as Ms Gilding said. It is difficult, and it is particularly difficult for people who are living in public housing. That is why we have a whole range of programs and processes in place to make sure that we can support individuals in their move.

Part of that is around—and I am not sure whether these questions were asked of Ms Vassarotti during her sessions here—inclusion of removalist costs. If there are circumstances where there are other items that a public housing tenant might want to take with them to their new home, just like the rest of us, we will support them, where we can, to move things like garden beds and the like.

Ms Gilding: With respect to our authorising environment, which sits under the Residential Tenancies Act and the Housing Assistance Act, we have a program that is established under the Housing Assistance Act. There is a provision under that program which enables the commissioner to manage the portfolio through requiring transfer in certain circumstances. Those circumstances are for sale, for redevelopment and where the nature of the building is potentially unsafe and at the end of its useful life. That provision has always been there. That has been part of our authorising environment that has been established under the piece of legislation through which the public trading enterprise operates.

The question is actually in reverse: at the beginning of this program we wanted to work with people without requiring them to transfer, even though that is a very long-held provision of our authorising environment.

MR CAIN: Minister, did you or one of your officials make this decision?

THE CHAIR: A final one. Can you please repeat that supplementary?

MR CAIN: I raise a point of order. I am asking a really simple question.

Ms Berry: Well, ask it then.

THE CHAIR: That is okay. I have given you the opportunity to re-ask your supplementary. There is no need for that further comment. Please ask your supplementary.

MR CAIN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, did you or one of your officials make the decision to move away from voluntary inclusion to forced relocations?

Ms Rule: Mr Cain, I think the official has already answered the question, which was to say that that has always been possible. Under the legislation it has always been possible. Our preferred approach at the start of the program was to operate on a voluntary basis.

MR CAIN: Hence why the change?

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain.

Ms Rule: When that did not yield enough people willing to relocate then we used the other provisions that exist under the legislation. There was not a single decision point to move away from an approach.

MR CAIN: There certainly is a decision point. There must be.

THE CHAIR: We will go to Dr Paterson now, with a supplementary.

DR PATERSON: Chair, can I also ask you to ask Mr Cain not to interject when officials are speaking, please. My supplementary is in respect to whether the government engaged community services through the process of this relocation program?

Ms Berry: Thank you, Dr Paterson. That has been a really important part of the growth and renewal program, through the previous one and through the current growth and renewal program—making sure that we have connections for people, if those connections existed, involved in the program. Otherwise, after we have met with people, talked with them and discussed their needs, Housing ACT has then been able to sometimes identify that these individuals need some other different kinds of supports and then we can put them in touch with different organisations to support them.

We have also had community service organisations involved in providing feedback and advice to Housing ACT about the program itself: how we can continue to make sure that it is better and best meets the needs of tenants through the communications that we might send to individuals, and different organisations that might want to be involved to support individual tenants. That has proven to be a successful way forward, as it was with the last program, where 1,288 homes were redeveloped, replacing some of those older bedsits where obviously everybody needed to move out of those before they could be demolished into new homes.

I might ask Mr Aigner again to provide some detail on the groups that we have involved as part of this program.

Mr Aigner: Yes, the minister has referenced the growth and renewal inclusive partnerships—what we call GRIP. There are going to be a few acronyms now, so I apologise in advance! GRIP came together in September last year to look at the policy around required relocations—in our internal operational policies, I should say—the processes, risks, communication matrix and collateral. The GRIP includes Woden and Northside community services, ACT Shelter, Legal Aid, ADACAS, and, at the time, ACTCOSS as well. They were involved in the process until we got to the point of communicating with tenants.

We set up a subsequent group, called GRISP, which is more of an operational group, which looks at individual tenant needs and makes sure that there are supports around individual tenants and tenants that we may have concerns for. That group continues to operate.

My team and I have engaged the sector more broadly through the joint pathways group, the executive and also the broader membership. We have spoken at the CSD community sector meetings. We have met individually with people like COTA, ADFA, CCL and ACTCOSS and are continuing to keep them abreast of where the program is at. We continue to take input on how we are doing things—the panels that we set up, the communications collateral that gets out there. Literally every week, we are making pivots to be more amenable to where our tenants are at and make this a successful program.

DR PATERSON: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Dare I say it: Mr Parton, would you like my substantive!

MR PARTON: I'm certainly up for that. Minister, regarding the growth and renewal program, including your commitment with the Greens to add 400 plus an additional 600 more dwellings to the public housing stock, can I ask at this stage how many of the 400 have been completed so far, either through construction or purchase?

Ms Berry: Thank you, Mr Parton. I can ask Ms Loft to provide some detail there.

Ms Loft: Mr Parton, as you know our target is to renew 1,000 dwellings and then grow the portfolio by 400. The total program to do this is that we need to build 700 new properties; 420 of those will be built on new land, and then purchase 140 from the market, and then purchase another 140 committed under the parliamentary and governing agreement.

I will give some program to date fast facts. As you know, we commenced in 2019. So to 30 June 2022 the program has sold 343 properties. We have received \$93.8 million in capital injections. We have expended \$260.1 million in capital works. We have demolished 167 dwellings for redevelopment. We have purchased 101 land sites for redevelopments. We have purchased 93 dwellings from the private market. We have completed construction of 219 dwellings. As Mr Aigner said we relocated just over 380 tenants to be able to do that.

MR PARTON: That is a wonderful summary. I am just wondering if it is possible to come up with a figure—I am looking at 400 and 600, but I am happy to look at the whole 1,000 that are coming—how many have been completed so far either through construction or purchase. I have a bit of an idea of that number based on the figures that you have just given me. But I am just wondering if it is possible to give an overall figure at this stage.

Ms Loft: The 400 growth for public housing through growth and renewal will not be realised till the end of the program. This is something that we touched on as well. It is not a linear program. We need to sell and demolish in order to construct and there is a

time lag for that.

MR PARTON: So, when do you expect to get this stock above 12,000? When will that happen?

Ms Gilding: At the conclusion of the program.

MR PARTON: Ms Gilding, I am looking for a more definitive answer than “at the conclusion of the program”. I am entertained by the answer but I am looking for a more definitive answer.

Ms Berry: Well, Mr Parton, I think if I take you back to the first growth and renewal program, for example, there was a large development block, a large block of public housing where it was sitting perhaps half empty because some of the tenants had been moved on to new homes. Before those tenants could be moved we needed to build or purchase new homes. So, then we built the new homes and then we demolished the old housing stock. So, the number of the stock that were sitting in the Housing ACT’s portfolio was moving around and was flawed. We have explained this to you a number of times, and that is okay. It is complicated. I get it. As we are building new homes, they get added in but as housing is being removed it gets taken off. At the end of the program we have committed to replacing the 1,000, the renewal, and bringing the 400 brand new homes to increase our public housing stock. But it is not a matter of going 400 here and then in four years’ time we have 400 homes. It is a little bit more complicated than that.

I know you are trying to act like there is some mystery here or that we are hiding something and we are not going to meet the commitment. We are definitely committed to doing that. We have said it publicly a number of times. You have received a lot of information now and in private briefings as well. We are happy to go through that again with you, if you need it. But the houses are being built. I have seen them. You have seen them. We will continue to do that. But, as has been explained, it is not linear. So you will not see an increase today or tomorrow or the next day, until we finish the program. Then you will see, as we have committed to, an increase of 400 from the figure that we started on and 1,000 new properties. This will mean we will have around 20 per cent of our public housing stock that will be much newer and much better suited to the needs of our tenants. And that will be a significant impact on our housing.

MR BRADDOCK: I would like to understand how SLA is contributing towards achieving the 30 per cent tree canopy cover and the 30 per cent permeable surface cover?

Ms Berry: Yes, we can respond to that.

Mr Dietz: Thank you, Mr Braddock for the question. I will hand to Rob Thorman. Rob is the manager of our sustainability resource allocation team and it is within our sustainability strategy which we do define as environmental goals. So I will hand over to Rob, thank you.

Mr Thorman: Thank you. I have read the privilege statement and acknowledge it. Yes, we are proud of what we are doing in relation to the tree canopy target. It is a key

element of our sustainability strategy. I am sure I have a copy here. I can leave one on the desk if anyone is interested.

One of the key themes that we are looking at is resilient communities. We have produced a range of information recently, some of it is about to go up on the web. We have earlier produced a climate wise gardens guide, which is aimed at our new residents to help them design climate wise gardens, so that on the private blocks, they can assist in achieving the canopy target.

We have also just produced a publication in two parts. One part is an internal document; it is our tree guide. It is an internal document for project managers to assist in selecting the right species and trying to maximise the amount of canopy that we deliver in the public domain, within the estates, which is more our key responsibility, the verges, the parks, and of course protecting native vegetation that already exists in the suburbs as much as possible.

The other piece of work is something aimed more at the public, and, as I said, it is about to go up on the internet. We have just had that published, and the minister has crafted a foreword to that document. So we will be proudly putting that up on the website shortly. That is—again, as part of a suite to the public—particularly aimed at our purchasers but also to other residents across Canberra on in how to plant the appropriate species for a garden—appropriate scale, size and resilient species—with the changing climate. That is particularly aimed at addressing the objectives in DV 369 to try and get increased canopy. So they are a couple of the things that we are working on at the moment.

MR BRADDOCK: So what percentage canopy cover do you aim for in public space to be able to have the whole suburb be able to reach the 30 per cent cover?

Mr Thorman: Yes, well, we have done an analysis of some of our recent suburbs and we are pretty confident. How you measure suburbs depends on the stage of the development, so obviously, the trees, you have to wait for the trees to grow. But we are pretty confident in a number of the new suburbs. If you look at Taylor, for example, we are pretty much on target to reach the 30 per cent. I do not have the figures at the moment about the relative proportion of what is in the public open space between verges and what is in reserves and—

MR BRADDOCK: Could you please take that on notice for me?

Mr Thorman: Yes.

MR BRADDOCK: I would also be interested in what timeframe does your modelling show that we would achieve 30 per cent in Taylor?

Mr Thorman: Yes, no, happy to. We do have some details on that, but I do not have them at hand, but I am happy to take that on notice.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

DR PATERSON: My question is in respect to how the suburb of Whitlam is going. I think the first residents moved in around a year ago now. I note the government is

starting to look at the local shopping centre for development. So what can residents of Whitlam expect to see, and when, and how is that progressing?

Ms Berry: Before Mr Tennent comes down and talks about the consultation process that has been in place about shopping centres, just on the trees, I think Whitlam is another good example of the work of the Suburban Land Agency. Prior to Whitlam being developed, it was an open rural area and my recollection is there were around 30 existing trees on the site. I think more than half of those remanent trees were retained and we have now planted around 5,000 shrubs and trees on that site as part of the development. So it is a significant contribution that the Suburban Land Agency makes in that space.

Mr Tennent: Whitlam is going great guns for us. We have about 100 residents in there. Stage 1 is done. The landscape is nicely established. Stage 2 is sold and we are seeing quite frantic activity in terms of home building there. Stage 3, as I was mentioning before, is right under construction at the moment. Stage 4 has just gone into DA approval. So the full lifecycle of a suburb; we are right in the midst of it. The release of stage 3, or the construction of stage 3, coincides with the two sites which are the school and the local centre.

John has been talking about the importance of place making and listening to the community. Whitlam local centre was the perfect opportunity to really look closely at how we could do things as best we could in line with the new planning strategy, the 2018 planning strategy. It is an 18,000-square-metre site. We commenced by going to the community with essentially a blank piece of paper. We engaged a team of community consultation experts to work with us. We spoke to many, many stakeholder groups, including the Council on the Ageing. We talked to local primary schools. We talked to existing Coombs and Wright residents. They are obviously very passionate and vocal about shopping centres, so we wanted to hear from them. We talked to potential Whitlam residents and anyone else who wanted to come in and talk to us, including active travel experts—quite a range. They spoke to us and the feedback was very rich, very varied. From there we asked a team within SLA to start to think about how all that translates to built form.

The old days of the shopping centre with the surface carpark and the box, and you pull up, pop in, get your bread and milk and drive home are gone. The planning strategy and the 70/30 approach in the ACT at the moment call for hubs of activity. The Whitlam local centre is a perfect opportunity to integrate many things there. Listening to the community, there was an appetite for mixed use in terms of the key supermarket anchor tenant but also things like community spaces and spaces for medical, gyms and public squares, which was a big one. Whitlam local centre is really going to become more of a destination where people will come, they will stay, they will shop. It is close to the school. A big part of the consultation was on the shared street between the school and the local centre. It was very clear from the consultation that they wanted that pedestrianised and slowed down. All of that information has popped out the other end in what is a design and place framework. It is similar to what we did in the Coombs and Wright village .

So that is now very prescriptive about what will go on the site. We are looking at around two to three hundred dwellings. We are looking at a 1,500-square-metre supermarket.

We are looking at a central laneway. We are looking at a public open square, a pedestrianised street and then various levels of built form. That was presented back to the community and it was very, very well received. We have continued down that line. There has been a few further refinements and we have just put out Whitlam local centre onto stage 1 tender. It is always a nervous time when you come up with a vision and put it out to the market to see whether the industry is going to respond. The good news was a very positive response to stage 1, so there are many developers that share the vision about the new type of local centres that Canberra will see.

We are working through the stage 1 tender at the moment. Stage 2 will go out in about six months. Developers will be required to be quite consistent with the design and place framework, and we will stay with them during the journey, to make sure that what we have envisaged and what they have responded to, largely gets built.

DR PATERSON: Thank you. Is there an overall timeframe when a developer is chosen and will there be a build timeframe on that?

Mr Tennent: That is something that we will work through but 18,000 square metres is a pretty large site, so there is every likelihood it will be staged. There is every likelihood that SLA, as part of the stage 2 process, will be quite prescriptive about what we would like to see delivered first. It will come as no surprise that shops, the supermarket, will have a real priority for us in working with the developer.

DR PATERSON: Okay, thank you.

MS CLAY: It is really good to hear about all the consultation and planning, but I have still heard community concerns about the active travel elements. Have you integrated into the planning, the masterplan and the estate development plan, the active travel facility's design, the MIS05 tool? Have you integrated the active travel infrastructure interim plan and guideline?

Mr Tennent: Not at this stage because the design and place framework is essentially a reference design; what is essentially called a preliminary sketch plan. The deed that will be put in place in stage 2 will be very, very prescriptive about these sorts of things; end of trip facilities and other things that promote active travel.

The design also has been carefully considered to allow access for disabled. The grades have all been reconsidered, even to the point of lowering the school site to make sure there is great permeability through the site and there are no challenges to those who have mobility challenges. All of those very prescriptive codes that exist within TCCS will be absolutely embedded into the stage 2 process and will be part of the development.

MS CLAY: That is good to hear. Are you using the active travel practitioner's tool?

Mr Tennent: Yes, we are, yes.

MS CLAY: Great.

Mr Tennent: Having said that, Whitlam is a very challenging site in terms of topography. So there have been some difficulties. Certainly some people have talked

about the streets being too steep, but we are navigating that as we can.

MS CLAY: Sure, thank you.

MR CAIN: Continuing with the theme, on the subject of Alice Moyle Way, what in particular did you focus on with the community and consultation, particularly concerning safety? I know active travel has been a concern from some.

Mr Tennent: It has. Alice Moyle Way is that road I referred to, the one down the middle. The community were very clear in wanting it to be pedestrianised. So it is very similar to what we see in the city with bicycle and pedestrian priority. The speed limit, at this stage, is an indicated 40 kilometres an hour. What we have also done is, to avoid the typical pickup queue that occurs at a school, the SLA are funding additional off-site works to incorporate a ring road on the outside of the school to get the school traffic and those conflicts away. The last thing we wanted was for people not to be able to get in and out of the shops at pickup time, and even more important is the safety of the school community as they interact with the shops. So you will see the design. It is a pedestrianised street. There are generous widths and there are different surfaces to really indicate traffic calming. I think we are still considering central median parking but as I said we have responded to the community.

The only concern I have heard since we released the design for Alice Moyle Way was from one constituent, who I think wanted it closed to cars. Unfortunately, that is not practical in this particular instance. So, we are going to really pursue traffic calming measures and very strict low speed limits on that street.

MR CAIN: What about extending the local centre plaza up to the school for the safety of children?

Mr Tennent: Yes, we have been working very closely with the Education Directorate. They do not have a design for the school at the moment. However, we have been working with them about how the two sites can work together. So there is quite a generous pedestrian crossing that will exist across into the central square of the Whitlam local centre.

We would hope that education, as they start to think about how their school will work, not just for their school community but also for the local centre—there could be some good outcomes across both sites that will improve permeability but importantly, preserve the safety of children as they move about.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

MS CLAY: Minister, I am wondering what specific indicators for wellbeing in the home and housing domain ACT government has collected?

Ms Berry: Sorry, what was that?

MS CLAY: What wellbeing indicators has ACT government collected in the home and housing domain? So with our wellbeing indicators, in the home and housing domain, what are we reporting against?

Ms Berry: I think that might be a treasury question, more than housing, but I might just see—if you can ask the next question, if you have one, and we will—

Mr Ponton: Minister, my understanding is that that is certainly coordinated through our colleagues in the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate in terms of the domains.

MS CLAY: Sorry, Mr Ponton, I cannot hear you.

Mr Ponton: Sorry, that is coordinated through our colleagues in the Chief Minister Directorate.

MS CLAY: Treasury?

Mr Ponton: Yes.

MS CLAY: Yes, okay. So all the wellbeing questions are directed to treasury, regardless of the topic?

Mr Ponton: That would be my suggestion, yes.

MS CLAY: Okay.

MR PARTON: In relation to the satisfaction of public housing, budget statements G, page 49, table 35, in 2021, there was a drop in the satisfaction of public housing. Why has there been a greater drop of 10 per cent to 63 per cent against that? Can someone explain why that has occurred and what are the top reasons that tenants are not satisfied with the provision of public housing?

Ms Berry: Yes, I can ask one of my officials to provide some information in that space. Mr Aigner.

Mr Aigner: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question, Mr Parton. We are implementing a number of measures in housing to better understand satisfaction and our broader customer experience. Our hypothesis at this stage, and as I say, it is just a hypothesis, is that the year that we have had, particularly over the course of the pandemic, has made it difficult for us to service our clients fully.

It has been difficult to undertake maintenance in many properties. It has been difficult for our client service visits to happen, as you know—we spoke about that on Wednesday—and to support our tenants fully. So it has not been the tenant experience that we would have hoped for over the last two years, but we are working on improving that, and also understanding more about what clients want from us. That is something we are implementing over the next year.

MR PARTON: So what you are telling me, Mr Aigner, is that the people are less satisfied by quite a margin but you have no idea why.

Ms Rule: Mr Parton, I think Mr Aigner has answered the question. We measure

satisfaction. The satisfaction has gone down, you are correct. We are doing some work now to understand why. But the measurement that we take does not ask why our people are less satisfied. That is the work that we are doing now because it is of note and we do want to make sure that we can lift those results up again. So that work is underway to find out why.

MR PARTON: Can I just close on a couple of questions about that then. How many tenants were surveyed and how were they surveyed? How was that survey conducted?

Ms Gilding: I have the data in front of me here. The 2021-22 annual tenant survey was undertaken by Lonergan Research, with 2,348 randomly sampled households asked to complete the survey. So, 606 households responded to the survey, with results showing 60 per cent of public housing tenants were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall services provided by Housing ACT. The actual result was 16 below the target of 76 per cent, which equates to a 21 per cent variance. Of the 23 per cent of tenants who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied overall, almost half identified maintenance-related issues as the reason.

MR PARTON: I want to get back to the program and ask: how much is actually allocated to the program contract per year without the additional funding that we have touched on in these hearings? We know that there was an allocation and that there was an understanding that it is possible that the program could come forward and say, "Please, sir, may I have some more." How much is allocated in the program contract per year without additional funding taken into account?

Ms Gilding: The funding for maintenance over the long term for Housing ACT depends on the underlying capacity of the PTE. Our long-term average has been between \$40 million and \$45 million. There have been some programs that have topped that up, such as our energy efficiency programs, over the years.

In terms of what we saw this past financial year—and can I say: it is not the program that comes asking for more money; it is Housing ACT—

MR PARTON: Right—of course it is. Yes.

Ms Gilding: That is a contract variation that sits with that and is managed through the public trading enterprise. For this year, as we discussed before, there was that initial \$40 million that was allocated, and depending on performance throughout the year, there was the possibility to come back and bring forward those provisions, which then saw us spending, by 30 June, \$77-point-something million but committing the \$82 million.

MR PARTON: That is solid. I have got a question here that I am assuming instantly will be taken on notice because no-one is going to have this. Is it possible for you to provide a monthly breakdown of how much is allocated to the program, how much is spent, and how many work orders that represents? I see Ms Loft is nodding. Minister, I do not know if you can indicate that this is going to be taken on notice, and then I will just be quiet for a while and pass on to some others. No?

Ms Berry: No—I am just thinking about your question. I am sure we can take it on

notice. If we have got as much of that detail as possible, we can. Do we have it now?

Ms Loft: I do not have it on me. I can take it on notice. As part of the budget appropriation, Mr Parton, we do monthly reconciliations of the quarters and spend against the budget. That is reported quarterly through to cabinet, so it is all available.

MS CLAY: Minister, I am interested in how the SLA is integrating active travel on all its projects. We had a really good run-through for Whitlam, but I am just wondering if you can tell me how the SLA, on every project, integrates the municipal infrastructure design standard MIS05 active travel facilities design; how it integrates the infrastructure interim planning guideline; and how it uses the active travel practitioner's tool. And whether those are used on every project or whether it is sometimes yes and sometimes no.

Mr Dietz: Mr Gordon, would that be a question to you?

Mr Gordon: I think the detail of that question we would probably need to take on notice, to give a fulsome answer on it.

MS CLAY: Sure. I will just tell you what I am after, then, for the question taken on notice. With those three things: how will those be integrated on every land release; is it always integrated, or is it optional or is it mandatory; and is the practitioner's tool always used?

Mr Dietz: Great. Thank you. We will take that on notice.

DR PATERSON: Through the SLA's work—again, I am quite interested in the Molonglo Valley, around housing affordability in the new suburbs and how that is prioritised and delivered.

Mr Dietz: Through the ILRP process, we do work very closely with Housing ACT to understand—sorry, it is affordability that you are after, is it not? We work very closely with EPSDD to understand, of the 15 per cent that is identified in the notifiable instrument, how much is appropriate to apply to each of our different developments.

That is then reflected in a notifiable instrument, which does provide us, as part of delivering the ILRP, what we have to provide in that. I will call on Nic Holt to give a little more detail. However, what we have found in what we have delivered more recently—certainly, the target this year was a target of 122 to be delivered against the notifiable instrument for affordable housing and we delivered 196. So we have beaten the target in this particular year.

What is most pleasing is that when we looked at the sales through the affordable process, we found that 95 per cent of those sales went directly to people on the registered database. So that was very pleasing. Some of the reason as to why we have been able to include that is that we took it upon ourselves to ensure that the affordable housing policy and our register was very well known to the public. We have been able to increase the number of people on the registration database over the last two years.

Now that we have been delivering for some three to four years of this particular process,

we also have a much better idea of what the community is requesting in the affordable product. From lessons learned we were able to then feed that back into the types of development agreements that we have with the people that are providing on it. I also think that the increase in demand recently, too, has been very successful in ensuring that we can offer some of that product to affordable people under the affordable housing policy.

DR PATERSON: Thank you. Are you able to detail what the priorities are, perhaps either in size or in the affordable housing options?

Mr Dietz: Yes, I definitely can. I will hand to Nic Holt to provide some of that detail. A lot of it is around what, in a policy setting, we are required to deliver on, the number of bedrooms et cetera.

Mr Holt: I have read and understood the privilege statement. To add some more detail to what John was saying. Yes, we have had a successful year over the last 12 months with a lot of land released and exceeding our targets, especially in the affordable area.

As to the types of affordable product that we are delivering, we do monitor that through the registration of our database. We collect information on what people's preferences are. It is not surprising that most people would like a three-bedroom—a larger dwelling. Under the price thresholds they obviously represent probably a better value-for-money offering than some of the smaller dwellings, which are also probably more available on the open market as well.

We do have a lot of data which I could probably provide on notice, which gives a breakdown of type, age, demographics, those sorts of things, which is probably better to take on notice rather than read out.

DR PATERSON: Great. Thank you. How many Housing ACT houses will there be in Whitlam?

Ms Berry: We probably would not give a breakdown of the individual number of homes, but I can say that there will be public housing in Whitlam and there will be community housing as well, and affordable—

Mr Ponton: Sorry, Minister. In terms of the requirements for Whitlam, the number of public housing that has been identified is 104 and for community housing it is 52.

DR PATERSON: Great. Thank you.

Mr Ponton: Sorry—can I correct that? I looked at the wrong column. It is 52 and 10.

DR PATERSON: Thank you.

MS CLAY: Minister, in 'Nature and scope of activities' for the SLA, one of the goals is undertaking meaningful engagement with the Ngunnawal people and the traditional custodians of the land to understand cultural and heritage implications of SLA projects. I am wondering if you can tell me in the last 12 months what activities you have done under that?

Ms Berry: Sorry, what was that that you spoke to?

MS CLAY: In the last 12 months, what activities have you undertaken to conduct meaningful engagement with Ngunnawal people and to understand cultural and heritage implications of SLA projects?

Ms Berry: A significant amount of work. The Suburban Land Agency has partnered with Richie Allan, but also other groups, to understand the cultural significance of Whitlam in particular. It is part of my expectation of the Suburban Land Agency that there is cultural training and understanding of the Suburban Land Agency and also providing those opportunities to new residents within those suburbs, and across the construction cohorts that we use to develop land. I will ask Mr Dietz to provide some more detail there.

Mr Dietz: Thank you, minister. As the minister stated, it is very clear in her letter of expectations to the SLA that reconciliation in action is real. As a result we have a number of strategies which happen at the board level. We now have a member of our board who is a Wiradjuri lady.

We also ensure at our partnership level we represent, or we meet quite regularly, with the Dhawura Caring for Country group, which is an ESPDD initiative. We also meet with the ATSIEB member. I meet with her on a regular basis. I am meeting with UNEC in the next few weeks. We have these times to ensure that the partnerships between these levels are very much improving.

At the next level down, as part of our place making, we ensure when we are looking at history of site, probably the richest history is that of the Ngunnawal people and what they can bring to the knowledge of that site. So, it is absolutely key in what we do as part of our place-making process.

To implement that, as the minister said, we have been through a couple of initiatives. The first was to identify within our organisation a liaison officer to ensure that when we are looking to engage, we are doing so appropriately, respectfully and we are doing it with all the appropriate groups to engage with.

We have been through that process and we have just engaged a liaison officer who will help us in some of our projects. Namely, in Phillip and also in a built form project we have in north Wright.

In addition, as the minister said, we have done some significant work at Whitlam. The engagement process there was to ensure we fully understood the history in a way that we could fully educate the new community. I think education is the key to then developing respect within that community about the history of what they have had. Most recently we had an opening of the park where, as the minister said, Richie Allan helped us in the smoking ceremony and the welcome to country.

It happens in all of our different developments, but another key one has been our Kingston Arts project. Quite recently we took over the Kingston Arts precinct, the delivery of that precinct. On our review and reflection of what had occurred to date, we

acknowledged there was a gap in identifying the real richness of the cultural heritage when it came to way the Ngunnawal people use the land. We have engaged Curijo to help us to fully understand from all the knowledge holders, that richness of history, and then be part of the place-making to ensure that we are going forward appropriately.

I will ask Irena Sharp to give us a little more detail because the actual engagement process has targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Often when we go through our place-making process we find the response is not always as healthy as we would like from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nor from youth. In this particular one, in our arts engagement, we really focused on making sure we could understand the wants and needs from that part of our community. I think the results in a recent survey have been really good. So I will hand to Irena to give us a little more information on that.

Ms Sharp: In terms of the Kingston Arts precinct, it has really been a focus in our engagement to date. We invested a good six months to revisit and fill in the gaps from any previous engagements that occurred for this particular site. As John pointed out, certainly youth engagement and Ngunnawal engagement were missing elements in earlier engagements with the local community.

To complement what we are doing, because we are partnering with artsACT on this particular project, they too are undertaking a couple of avenues in bringing onboard the Ngunnawal engagement. One is around Ngunnawal language and use of Ngunnawal language in the future precinct. The other is the establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gallery space.

We have a number of different avenues through which we are trying to bring in the cultural significance of the site and ensure that going forward it truly represents the Ngunnawal culture. Whether it is through built form, whether it is through the estate and landscaping. or whether it is through the practices that arts organisations will take on.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

MR CAIN: Minister, I make reference to budget statements G, page 45. It states that there are 307 staff allocated for Housing ACT. How many of these staff are, or will be, on call centre phones?

Ms Berry: Mr Aigner can answer that question for you.

Mr Aigner: Thank you for the question. Thank you, minister. Our plan for this financial year is to build up to a force of 12 in our client engagement team.

MR CAIN: Is that 12 on the call centre as opposed to managing the inbox? Could you clarify that please?

Mr Aigner: Our client engagement team will be taking calls. They may also be managing inbox and over time we will also have a chat function. That is part of the functionality that we are looking to provide.

MR CAIN: How many voicemails does the call centre receive daily?

Mr Aigner: I would have to take that on notice.

MR CAIN: Thank you. And the average waiting time as well?

Mr Aigner: Waiting time is not a measure we take. We take other measures around the effectiveness of the call centre; in particular, average handling time, abandonment rates and grades of service. Our goal on abandonment rates is to come down to an industry standard of about 8 per cent. I do not have those figures right here, unfortunately, but I can get them to you.

The second one is grade of service. The grade of service measures how quickly we tackle a phone call and then the handle time looks at how long we are on the phone with the client. We target around a four or five minute engagement with tenants. The aim of that is that we handle the person or the tenant at the first point of contact with Housing without having to pass them on.

MR CAIN: Can you explain why you do not measure the average wait time for phone calls? It seems something very obvious to be able to do.

Mr Aigner: We do it on a daily basis to manage our staff loading. We will look at it at the end of every day, but we do not look at it as an overall KPI.

MR CAIN: So, what is it that you are looking at, at the end of day?

Mr Aigner: The three measures that I already mentioned.

MR CAIN: So, again, are you able to provide over a period of time what the average wait time was with phone calls?

Ms Berry: I think he has just responded to that question, Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: Did he state that he measured it on a daily basis or throughout the day you measured and adjusted it. Is that right?

Ms Berry: I think what Mr Aigner said was that we look at it in—

MR CAIN: I was directing that to Mr Aigner. If he could respond because—

Ms Berry: Well, I will ask Ms Rule, because she is the Director-General, to respond to that question. Thank you.

Ms Rule: Thanks, Minister. What Mr Aigner was saying is that we look at that metric every day to assess staff workload and adjust accordingly, but we do not regularly record that as a performance metric.

MR CAIN: So you have just visually sighted it and there is no record made of it? I am not sure I understand what is going on here.

Ms Rule: We do not record it as a performance metric.

MR CAIN: Do you record it at all? Is there a record of the daily wait time?

Ms Rule: We assess it every day to look at the load that staff are carrying in the call centre.

MR CAIN: And is that recorded?

Ms Rule: It is recorded.

MR CAIN: Thank you. That was simple. Could you provide that data over the last month or so?

Ms Rule: We can take that on notice.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

MR PARTON: In relation to Mr Cain's line of questioning, how many staff monitor the CSD email inbox? It has certainly come to our attention that this inbox is frequently full and tenants cannot email in. I would like to know how many staff monitor it and how often that is checked by staff.

Ms Rule: Mr Aigner just answered that question, which is that the team of 12 client engagement staff monitor that inbox, as well as taking calls.

MR PARTON: How often is that checked? I guess there is not an actual tick list—

Ms Rule: We are not sitting there and watching; people access the inbox.

MR PARTON: My question probably comes back to the minister. I am happy for Mr Aigner to have a crack, too. If tenants are struggling to get through on the phone lines and email inboxes are full, when those tenants then appear in person and they are told that there is no-one who can help them, how are tenants expected to communicate effectively with Housing ACT? I am hearing from quite a number that they reach that roadblock where there is no way for them to communicate.

Ms Berry: Firstly, in response to that question, I would encourage you, if you come across tenants like that, to put them in touch with me. I might be able to find out what has happened in that space and work with Housing on understanding if there is an issue there, if there has been a problem with a tenant getting in touch, and how we can support that person. I would rather know who they are and support them immediately, once you have put them in touch with me, rather than wait for an opportunity like this.

It might be helpful, Mr Parton, if Mr Aigner goes through the different kinds of ways that tenants get in touch with Housing, for what reasons and how they are responded to—if, for some reason, at some point in time, the phone is engaged or they need to be connected in a different way, back from Housing to the tenant. Could you go through that process so that everybody understands how Housing works in that space?

Mr Aigner: Sure. Thank you for the question, Mr Parton. We are trying to have a number of channels through which clients can engage with us. We recognise that, in the past, there has been an over-dependence on the housing manager, which is a challenge, because people go on leave and go away from their phones. They should be out in the field.

In a way, we try and indicate any door being the right door. We have upgraded our inbound phone systems and created a consolidated client engagement team across all of the client services branch. There is a significant piece of work now on improving the skill set and measurements. All of the measures I am talking to you about have come in over the past year, as we have been able to upgrade our systems and measure all of these things.

If a client wants to get in contact with us, they can go directly to their housing manager, they can go to the client engagement team, they can come to the shopfront in Belconnen, and they can send us an email. Email inboxes do not get full, so I am a bit confused by that problem. Voicemail may occasionally be full. That is a little bit confusing. As the minister pointed out, it would be good to understand the specific circumstances around that.

In summary, there are a number of ways to get to us. We are measuring much more of that, and there are many more options for any client to come through to Housing.

DR PATERSON: You mentioned the possibility of a live chat function. Can you explain more about that—how that might work and how that might assist tenants?

Mr Aigner: We are not there yet, I have to say, Dr Paterson. That is part of the plan over the coming year. We just want people to be able to interact with us in any way they can; bearing in mind some of the challenges that we have with some of our tenants and their access to technology. We are trying to create, as I said, any channel being the right channel.

MR PARTON: I was hoping to examine some of the challenges that are currently being faced in Oaks Estate.

Ms Berry: If it is about tenants, it might be a question for Minister Vassarotti.

MR PARTON: I am happy to put this aside and deal with you guys privately on it.

Ms Berry: Okay.

MR PARTON: Let us go to the energy efficiency program. This is for the replacement of hot-water heat pumps and reverse cycle air conditioners for Housing ACT tenants. Can I ask: what was the process? How were tenants chosen for inclusion in this program?

Ms Berry: Thank you for the question. Tenants were not chosen. It was more that their equipment needed to be replaced. Ms Loft can provide some information.

Ms Loft: Predominantly, it was an opt-in program. Also, when we went out and an

appliance was not working, we would replace it with electric.

MR PARTON: How many tenants were sent letters? I am a little confused because you say that the tenants were not chosen; they opted in. But it was based on their equipment, so surely there must have been a process involved where that was identified and some tenants were sent letters. How many were sent letters?

Ms Loft: I have all of the numbers for installations and appliance upgrades, but I do not have the number of letters sent.

MR PARTON: I am usually amazed at your ability to find figures, Ms Loft. I want to know how many replacement systems, both heat hot-water pump and reverse cycle, were available under this scheme. You know exactly why I am asking. Obviously, there were some that did not catch the boat. They thought they were going to and, all of a sudden, they did not. I am trying to get a handle on how many of these systems were available under the program.

Ms Loft: It was not the volume of appliances; it was a dollar amount. Depending on the upgrade, it was about how much appropriation was left. That is how we got to the volume of appliances. It was either opt-in or we would then initiate the upgrade, based on the property condition audits that I was talking about previously, or housing managers or subcontractors reporting faulty equipment.

MR PARTON: Why was there no information on the date of conclusion of the program in the letter? I know you would be aware that there were quite a number of tenants left believing that they were going to receive this updated system and the program had closed. Why was that that not communicated?

Ms Loft: The contract ended on 30 June this year. We still have staff working on the closure, dealing with tenants and talking them through that.

MR PARTON: There was a date deadline?

Ms Loft: There was a date deadline, correct; and we are looking at other initiatives now, to replace that.

MR PARTON: Thank you. And we will talk about that other matter, Minister.

MR CAIN: Following on from that, how many tenants were eligible?

Ms Loft: It is per household, not tenants. It is whatever the appliance is in the household.

MR CAIN: How many households were there?

Ms Berry: That is the number we are going to have to take on notice.

Ms Rule: I do not think we will be able to provide that number, because we do not necessarily have a complete list of all of the appliances in all of the product lists. The scheme was based on people approaching us, the equipment failing and needing replacement, or as part of maintenance. I am not sure that we will have a number that

says, “There were X number of appliances in Y households that were eligible for this program.”

MR CAIN: Over the past, for example, six months, are you able to provide how many actually received the replacements?

Ms Loft: Yes. For the life of the program, over the four years, we provided 3,792 appliance upgrades. If you would like that broken down more specifically, I would have to take that on notice for you.

MR CAIN: That would be much appreciated. Yes, please take that on notice.

Ms Loft: The volume in the past six months, yes.

MR PARTON: Can we talk about shared fences? Minister, or anyone else in the room, can you explain the process that a private resident must go through when they share a fence with a Housing ACT property and they wish to upgrade that shared fence? What is that process? How long does it take on average?

Ms Berry: Yes, we can provide some information on that. Mr Parton, it is often easier for a private residence to deal with a public housing neighbour than it is with another private home.

Ms Gilding: I am happy, at 5.20 pm on a Friday afternoon, to talk about fences. Mr Parton, I will take that on notice and get for you the detailed, step-by-step procedure that happens. As you can imagine, there is a collaboration that needs to be undertaken in terms of the type of fence that the private owner wants to have installed, versus what we install as standard to our properties.

It can take some time. We know that there are issues when dealing with differences of opinion. Sometimes we certainly have private owners who wish to do the upgrade themselves, but then seek compensation back from public housing, and sometimes that does become complex. If I can take that on notice and get the detail for you, I would be happy to do that.

If there are specific examples—I know this can be a difficult and complex process—again, I am very happy to work through those.

MR PARTON: All right. In regard to taking that on notice, I am looking for how long that process takes on average. I would love to know how many requests for shared fence upgrades you receive, and how long the process takes. Once the fence is installed, how does the reimbursement take place, and what is that process? That is all I have on that line; that is it.

Ms Gilding: Yes, we will provide you with our fact sheets.

DR PATERSON: On landscaping of housing estates, when you have multiple public housing properties, how do you assess that? Is there a budget for landscaping? How often are landscapes renewed?

Ms Loft: Is this for existing properties for maintenance or new constructions?

THE CHAIR: Existing properties for maintenance.

Ms Loft: Our multi-unit properties have a schedule. Mowing of the lawns and clean-ups are all part of the contract. Individual tenants maintain their own properties, unless there is something like a tree removal; they will come through as reported maintenance and we will assess it.

DR PATERSON: With multi-household properties, if there is more than mowing and general maintenance, and they actually need replanting, is that a part of the maintenance budget?

Ms Loft: It is part of the common areas for the multi-unit properties.

MS CLAY: Minister, in the employment profile, you have one woman and five men at executive level in the SLA, and most of the admin officers are skewed towards female. What steps are you taking to increase gender equity and diversity within the SLA?

Mr Dietz: You are right; at the executive level we do have a bias towards male as opposed to female. We are looking at ensuring that it remains appropriate, when we go through an actual process of replacement, to ensure that it is a clear, open, transparent, robust decision, and that panel people on that decision are appropriately diverse as well.

We look for opportunities when we go through a replacement of executive. It is the case that the SLA has been relatively constant with its executive group in the past three to four years, and the opportunities for replacement have not come up. When they do, however, we do ensure that we are targeting a process which is very much balanced in its diversity, to ensure that unconscious bias and the possible things that could eventuate from that do not become apparent.

Beyond just the executive group itself, it is through our employment process that we need to ensure that the concept of unconscious bias is not something that could become apparent in our employment processes. To ensure that that is not the case, we have embarked on an education process within SLA around unconscious bias. It has been a process that we looked through in the past year. It was a wonderful training exercise. The executive went on it. It was actually a mandatory course, and many of our SLA staff were on it. It is about ensuring that the decisions we are making are appropriate decisions, whether it be employment, procurement or other business opportunities.

MS CLAY: What is our gender and diversity balance looking like—not at the executive level, not at the admin level, but at that in-between, senior level?

Mr Dietz: Across the agency, it is very well balanced; it is almost 50 per cent. Where it is a little bit unbalanced at the two ends, it is compensated for in the middle.

MS CLAY: It is just that executive layer that is the problem. Is that the same for other measures of diversity—not just gender but cultural and ethnic?

Mr Dietz: I think some of the other measures of diversity are less prolific in their

measuring.

MS CLAY: Yes, not apparent.

Mr Dietz: With Indigenous, we have about two per cent, which is good, but it is essentially similar. That is not reflected in our executive group; the measures are too small. In most of the other areas we are relatively okay, when you compare us to other parts of government.

MS CLAY: With six people at executive level, it is hard to get something statistically.

Mr Dietz: Yes, that represents all diversity.

MR CAIN: Of the 307 Housing ACT staff, could you provide a breakdown of how many staff are under each job title and the level? You might take that on notice.

Ms Berry: I think you have misunderstood, Mr Cain. The Suburban Land Agency is separate from Housing ACT. The question was asked of the Suburban Land Agency around gender equality.

MR CAIN: I am sorry; you are not here to make a ruling on the question.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, please.

Ms Berry: I beg your pardon, Mr Cain; I was just clarifying the question that I was getting. I do not think you need to speak like that.

MR CAIN: I am just clarifying what you were saying.

THE CHAIR: Can we stop the chatter between the both of you for a moment, please?

Ms Berry: A bit of polite and respectful behaviour would be all right.

THE CHAIR: The question that I understand Mr Cain is asking is more in relation to the staffing arrangements of the SLA; is that correct?

MR CAIN: Yes; and Housing ACT.

Ms Berry: No—

THE CHAIR: Is this within your area or not?

Ms Berry: What I am trying—

MR CAIN: Sorry; broader to the SLA.

Ms Berry: to understand is that one of your committee members has asked a question of the Suburban Land Agency about the staff and gender equality. The question is: is Mr Cain's question a substantive question or a supplementary to that question? It is up to you; you are the chair, but he is asking a question now about—

MR CAIN: Could you leave it to the chair, Minister?

Ms Berry: They are two separate portfolios.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain. Yes, keep going.

Ms Berry: They are two separate portfolios, so I am wondering—

MR CAIN: I am sorry; I am waiting for the chair to make a ruling.

THE CHAIR: Are you suggesting that answering that question comes under a different area of responsibility?

Ms Berry: No, I am not suggesting anything.

DR PATERSON: I am suggesting that, Chair.

Ms Berry: It was one of your committee members.

DR PATERSON: I believe it is a substantive question that is not related to SLA or gender diversity.

THE CHAIR: Okay. We will go to Dr Paterson for a substantive. Mr Cain, when the call comes back to you, you can ask that question as a substantive.

MR CAIN: Unless I wish to ask another one, of course.

THE CHAIR: Or ask another one. Dr Paterson, we have 15 minutes left. Do you have a substantive?

DR PATERSON: Thank you. My substantive is in relation to the SLA's work in Woden—the large block in Woden. A while ago you chatted to the Woden Valley Community Council. I am wondering how progress on that is going.

Mr Dietz: Thank you for the question, Dr Paterson. I will call on Irena Sharp, who is in charge of that part of the SLA.

Ms Sharp: We have embarked on the delivery of a place design brief for that particular site. You are talking about block 1, section 7?

DR PATERSON: Yes.

Ms Sharp: It is a process that we have undertaken previously on a number of other projects, such as Belconnen Lakeshore, and as part of the Kingston arts precinct as well. It is a fairly well-developed process that follows a couple of stages. The first stage is very much about the identification of who wants to be involved in the process and the identification of a variety of stakeholders. We are particularly aware of a number of people that we need to speak to, because there is so much going on, in and around the site itself. There is always an opportunity, through that identification process, to allow

everybody else to put their hand up and participate.

The second phase of the process is a lot more about the actual engagement, asking the right questions and going through the identification of the community's aspirations for the site and what we should be cognisant of when we put the site up for land release.

What is significant in this particular process is that that place design brief is actually part of the sales documentation. The type of methodology that we have elected for this particular site is not to put it on the market via auction but to go through a tender process. This is a design-based tender process. At the end of the day, once the place design brief is formulated and embedded into the requirements, we are looking for the response to that place design brief. We are looking for those who are interested in the site to prepare a design response, and identify and demonstrate exactly how they responded to the themes and aspirations that are created through the place design brief process. We go through the evaluation of those themes and proposals and, in the end, we will elect a preferred tenderer with whom we would negotiate the actual sale. They will become the successful tenderer at the end of the process.

The actual place design brief engagement takes a bit of time; it will take a good six months to complete, after which we will embark on the actual land release. The design-based tender process can take somewhere between six and nine months, depending on how many submissions we receive.

The important aspect of all of this is engagement with the community first; the design comes second. It captures not just the planning requirements for the site but the community's aspirations for the site and any added value that the future proponent or the buyer of the site can include.

It is a complex planning area, because we have a lot of government projects in play. We also have a lot of private projects in play. We have certainly taken steps to have a conversation with the Hellenic Club, and even to have a conversation with Westfield, because they are looking at some of their own growth. Our colleagues from a variety of other agencies already have a way of coordinating. We are part of that process. This is about engaging with the community directly and understanding how they want this future site to connect with all of these other works that will happen.

DR PATERSON: There is a fair bit of discussion and concern from different groups around sporting and community facilities in Woden. Is there opportunity to build into the design those kinds of aspirational features of new development?

Ms Sharp: Part of our process is very much in response to the planning requirements for the site, which are defined through the Territory Plan and the zoning that has been established for the site. That particular process was part of the master planning for Woden town centre. The outcome of it is the rezoning of the site, and we come in with complementary engagement with the community at more of a grassroots level as to what excellence in the zone would look like.

We do not challenge the zoning for the site or the permissible uses for the site. We do not amend them; we do not ascribe additional uses. We ask the proponents to respond to planning requirements that are set out by the Territory Plan and, in addition, design

aspirations of the community. I do not believe that a sporting facility is permitted. I would have to check whether that is a use that is dedicated for that site. Therefore, we would not be able necessarily to include it.

DR PATERSON: With the design, there are so many different, conflicting views. You mentioned Hellenic; they are also going through a rebuild. There are the Woden central towers; light rail and CIT are coming in; and there are the current buildings. How will a design process ensure that we are not just building all of these different things but that in the whole area these are all complementary to each other?

Ms Sharp: One of the ways that we keep in touch with the evolution of those different projects, particularly private sector projects, is through the National Capital Design Review Panel. We are able to attend those sessions and familiarise ourselves with what the ideas are for those sites.

Separately, we also have direct contact on the plans for Hellenic Club and with Westfield. We will continue to meet with them and discuss how their designs are evolving and what will happen on our side. We will only be able to reveal in our sales documents what they are willing to give us, so that we can make future design teams aware of the consideration and thinking around the surrounding sites. Information relevant to what Major Projects or TCCS might be doing is part of our normal interagency coordination. Again, we will be able to have a certain amount of information available to release with our sales package.

MR BRADDOCK: In terms of the consultation, does that just include YourSay or are you utilising other means to elicit community feedback?

Ms Sharp: The whole concept of a place design brief rests with using different methodologies to reach out. We recognised a long time ago that town hall-style meetings are not enough. Certain people will respond to that kind of engagement, but we now have a whole heap of different methods of reaching out. Some of them involve us meeting with them; others involve us advertising an event that we would like to take place.

It is really important to us to have ongoing communication with Woden Valley Community Council and have them promote the activities that we will be undertaking. YourSay is really good for us in terms of outlining what the process is, where we are at in the process, and publishing any reports that come out of the engagements so that they are publicly available.

One of the most successful opportunities we have with YourSay is surveys, which we are using at the moment, for example, with the Kingston arts precinct. We have a visual survey that probes those questions about what people see as being a good outcome for the site.

Ms Berry: Chair, I am mindful of the time. At the start of this hearing, Mr Parton asked me a question about the growth and renewal program. He said he quoted from an article in the *RiotACT* about funding for that program. I have since reviewed the article that I think he was referring to, and he quoted from the article but not from me. He is confusing the 15 per cent bonus from the commonwealth and reinvesting that money in

the construction and purchase of new houses. That was not advice or information provided by me. That is a quote from the article. I wanted to clarify that and put that on the record.

THE CHAIR: What date is that article? What is the title?

Ms Berry: It was Mr Parton's question; 28 July 2022.

MR PARTON: I have the article. I know this is not a line of questioning here, but, Minister, on a number of occasions—

THE CHAIR: We are not having a debate here. Do you want to compare the article or not?

MR PARTON: No, because there is a silly chance at this stage that I may get another question.

DR PATERSON: This is Mr Parton's commentary on the minister. The minister was responding—

MR PARTON: I will just let it go to bed and hope that the call somehow gets to me.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Parton.

DR PATERSON: Excuse me, Chair.

THE CHAIR: I was letting Mr Parton finish, as you asked him a question—

Ms Berry: It is important to—

THE CHAIR: as to whether he wanted to compare the article. I was getting the details of the article to make sure that we were referring to the same article.

Ms Berry: I think we are, Chair.

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton has decided not to, so now we will move on.

Ms Berry: I wanted to make sure that the record was corrected.

MR CAIN: A point of order, Chair: we do not need further clarification from the minister.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Cain.

Ms Berry: A visiting member, Chair.

THE CHAIR: Ms Clay, on a substantive. You have three minutes.

MS CLAY: Thank you, Chair. I intend to use them. Minister, I am interested in the Kingston arts precinct. This project has had a pretty long and complex history. A lot of

people in the arts community were quite relieved when it transferred over to the SLA. That will probably get a better outcome than was likely to happen. I am interested in a few things. I am interested in what the uptake is. How many individual artists are inputting? There are quite a few different consultations going on. How many people have been involved in those, other than the arts orgs? Can you run me through that? Do you have numbers on that?

Ms Berry: It might be best if I take that on notice for you, on behalf of the Chief Minister, because that project is his responsibility.

MS CLAY: It is not the SLA?

Ms Berry: It is the SLA, but it is not with me.

THE CHAIR: There are two—

MS CLAY: Sure. If you take that one on notice, that would be great.

Ms Berry: I will do my best to get that information from the Chief Minister's office.

MS CLAY: Sure. I might ask the rest of my substantive and you can tell me which minister I need to direct it to. I am finding it slightly tricky.

Ms Berry: If it is about Kingston, it is the Chief Minister.

MS CLAY: The Chief Minister, not the arts minister?

Ms Berry: I am not the arts minister.

MS CLAY: No. Some people in the arts community are concerned about where the artists will be able to affordably live when they are in residence there. Is that a question for the Chief Minister, the arts minister or someone else?

Ms Berry: I think it is his.

MS CLAY: The Chief Minister?

Ms Berry: Yes. I will take it on notice and, if we can get a response for you, we will.

MS CLAY: That would be great.

THE CHAIR: Given that it is now 5.45 pm, we will end the hearing. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Minister Berry and officials for their attendance today. If witnesses have taken any questions on notice, would you please provide answers to the committee secretary within five working days. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all members, statutory office holders and officials for their appearances throughout the two weeks of hearings. If members wish to lodge any questions on notice, please get them to the committee secretary within five working days of the hearing. The estimates committee hearing is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 5.45 pm.