



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2023-2024

**(Reference: [Inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2023-2024 and
Appropriation \(Office of the Legislative Assembly\) Bill 2023-2024](#))**

Members:

**MR M PARTON (Chair)
MS J CLAY (Deputy Chair)
MR M PETTERSSON**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 17 JULY 2023

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms K de Kleuver (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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Witnesses must tell the truth: giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter, and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9 am.

WALLACE, MR CRAIG, Head of Policy, Advocacy for Inclusion

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings of the Select Committee on Estimates 2023-2024. The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of the city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

The proceedings are being broadcast live and are also being transcribed. They will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used the words, "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses later to confirm questions taken on notice.

In this first session we will hear from Advocacy for Inclusion. We welcome Mr Craig Wallace via Webex. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. I know that you are across all of this, but can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Wallace: I have read and understand the implications of the statement.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Mr Wallace, would you like to start by making an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I would. Thanks for the opportunity to give evidence today. I will make a brief opening statement and then take questions.

This year AFI made a very detailed budget submission because we wanted to describe how the government might deliver the ACT disability strategy, the disability health strategy, the disability justice strategy and the inclusive education strategy. We focused on these whole-of-government strategies because the need for them is very clear from our advocacy. Strategies like these are also necessary to shore up the sustainability of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. We have had very clear pointers to that in the recent report from the NDIS review, which described the scheme as an "island in the desert".

We also urged investments that address gaps in disability support, to lift universal design and accessibility in housing, transport and the urban realm, amidst the planning review and Canberra's rapid development. In addition, we have emphasised the continuing need to mitigate the impacts of COVID and unintended consequences of legislation like VAD, as well as policy shifts in areas like electrification, urban development and climate mitigation.

Turning to the measures in the budget, we were pleased that the papers clearly flagged an intention to fully fund and implement the said strategies, but we remain concerned

about the lack of specific up-front investment. We know government cannot fully fund strategies that have not been finalised, but there are some specific proposals on the table, especially for the health strategy, and we could start setting money aside.

People with disability have said that we need capital works improvements; dedicated funding for wraparound diagnostic services; accessible equipment and kit; information and infrastructure; and social model training of medical staff. We also share and support Women with Disabilities ACT's call for funding to support people with disability to access assisted reproductive technology and address equity issues due to the cost of that technology.

We welcome the funding for health infrastructure in the budget and service improvement. We also warmly welcome the housing measures. People applying for public housing or needing housing maintenance in older homes are a pretty big part of our housing advocacy. We also understand there is some provision for short-term public housing at the gold standard, and we welcome this. We have some things to say, which I have written lots of notes about but I will not go through, about how we want some of the private housing measures to be realised and to include housing at the gold standard.

We applauded the decision to uncap and increase the Taxi Subsidy Scheme. It is a modest, small scheme but a relatively high-impact measure that will support people with disabilities. We also welcomed building infrastructure, with a community centre and other upgrades with an accessibility focus. We need investment in government buildings to be matched with attention given to older community hubs. This includes provision for clean air and COVID safety in places where disability services are received.

Lastly, we cautiously welcome the focus on inclusive education. However, our advocacy was for improvements to the student loading for students with disability and funding for universal design. We are currently seeking more detail on the inclusion coaches model, which will need to be carefully designed and implemented.

We were a bit disappointed that we did not see initiatives to build social planning capacity in the ACT or climate mitigation for people with disability, which is an emerging need. We also sought funding for the community outside the public service, which would mitigate some of the unintended consequences that we see of the likely introduction of voluntary assisted dying in this jurisdiction.

That completes my opening statement, and I am happy to take questions from the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Wallace. When I was reading through your submission, the thought that I had was that you seemed optimistic about the government's stated vision but that you were disappointed with the lack of genuine action in the budget; you were really pleased with the talk but not so much with the walk. Is that a simplistic assessment?

Mr Wallace: I do not think it is entirely wrong; but it is good to have a stated commitment to strategies, which means that there is an intent to actually do things,

and activity that surrounds the strategy. That is a bit of a step forward from where we have previously been, with aspirational statements, for instance.

We know what the strategies are, but with some of them, the need is now. The need for work around accessibility in the healthcare system, particularly in the acute care system, was evident during COVID. It is evident now. We cannot wait until we have shiny logos on a report that is launched by a minister, to start doing some of that work. It is important to recognise that the community has done a stack of work to get the strategy landed, but there are some investments that we need now to deliver on it.

THE CHAIR: In your submission you have made a number of recommendations regarding things that you would like to see in the budget. Is there something that tops the list for you, Mr Wallace?

Mr Wallace: Yes, we would like to see some early investments in the disability health strategy, particularly around equipment, kit, better information and training in the acute care end of it, in hospitals, so that we are matching some of the infrastructure upgrades that we are doing in Canberra Hospital, plus the acquisition of the north-side hospital, with good disability access and starting how we mean to finish.

We seem to be doing infrastructure well in some of them, but we are not doing the cultural change that we need so that those are disability-friendly spaces. Some of them do not have good access and equipment, even for visitors, let alone for patients. That would top my list at the moment.

MS CLAY: Mr Wallace, thanks for joining us today. You have some recommendations that we need more public housing at the gold standard and we need some tax breaks or incentives, or some measures to make sure that we get more accessible housing in the private market as well. That is quite interesting, having read, in the Pegasus review of the budget, that our public housing stock has actually decreased over time. Do you see it as a high priority that we need more gold-standard accessible public housing and perhaps more public housing, all round?

Mr Wallace: Yes, we need more housing that is at the gold standard. The gold standard is fully accessible housing that you can move into, with some minor changes. You might put in a rail, for instance, but you would not require structural fixes. Most of the housing that we are getting at the moment through social, also through public, and definitely through private, is either at the silver standard or below, which means you do not have core infrastructure—a bathroom wall is in such a place that you would have to do major works in order to move it.

What we need, from the point of view of our advocacy, is more housing that a person with a disability could move into right now. We understand that some of the new public housing that is coming on board will be gold standard, but others will be silver standard. We need to maximise the level of gold-standard housing.

In reality, for many people, there is a dual barrier of low incomes and low accessibility, so public housing remains an important vehicle. But we are also seeing an increased need to address the missing middle, for people who have maybe acquired some income and who might not be eligible for public housing, and that is a social

housing fix. In the long term, we need good private housing fixes as well. The market clearly is not stepping up, which always mystifies me, to be honest. There is a good case for doing it in private rental, but it never seems to happen. I hope that answers your question.

MS CLAY: It does; thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: What effect will an increase in the Taxi Subsidy Scheme have on Canberrans that utilise the scheme?

Mr Wallace: This is a reasonably small scheme, and of reasonably small benefit, but it has a high impact for those people. We are talking about people that currently cannot use buses—and I could talk about that problem at length—and who might have barriers to using private vehicles. Increasingly, the design of private vehicles is not conducive for some people with a disability. They are spending, to get across Canberra—if you are in Gungahlin and you need to get to the south-side hospital—\$60 a day out of a disability pension.

We did some analysis, a kind of cameo budget, for a person with a disability and found that people were, in theory, around \$800 a fortnight down, and a lot of that was due to transport costs. Transport costs are a really big thing. I know people that are working who use wheelchairs and cannot drive, and they would be better off on a pension or even Newstart—JobSeeker, or whatever they call it now—because of the expense of taxis, which are the most expensive transport modality, possibly short of chauffeured cars or something. It is really expensive to hire taxis.

That scheme was previously capped and limited to a very meagre number of vouchers. That was unreasonable and injurious to those people. I am glad that they have fixed it. That was also a recommendation from the Auditor-General. For a small group of people, it is a welcome, modest but significant piece of reform.

MR PETTERSSON: Does that increase capture all of the demand for the scheme?

Mr Wallace: They have not completely uncapped it. The subsidy has about doubled, but it is as good as being uncapped. People are now allowed to take a really large number of trips. In our view it captures our ask. You would need to ask the Auditor-General, who also made recommendations on this, whether it captures their ask. We were pretty satisfied with that piece of reform.

THE CHAIR: Mr Wallace, in regard to the transport inequities faced by people with a disability, you have flagged in public commentary in recent months a suggestion that, as we transition the private car fleet to EVs, that inequity could become greater for people with a disability. Why?

Mr Wallace: There are a number of things going on that are problematic in this space. One of them is that electric vehicles are being built and designed without reference to the accessibility needs of people with a disability, as are many modern cars, but we are seeing this accelerated for people with a disability. For instance, there are side airbags and arrangements with the design of cars being higher which mean that they will not work with most disabled driver modifications.

There are issues with inaccessible charging infrastructure that are a barrier for people. We are not seeing good regulation around access to charging infrastructure for people. We are also seeing other sets of issues around electrification that relate to concerns about reliability of supply and uptake of a range of electrical devices and people's ability to use them.

When you couple this with the fact that we still do not have a fully accessible bus network, it means that, as well as some of these issues and experiences that people have with interacting with spaces and places like shared zones, the overall transport picture for people with disability is looking a bit perilous. While I know the government has ruled out the intention of removing the capacity to take cars into parts of the city, the reality is that would be a very bad move as well. There are some people that are car dependent and they are also dependent on older non-electric vehicles because of the way that they are designed. They need to be able to travel by car and be able to park next to the place that they are going to, including in the city.

It feels like there is a giant transport revolution that has taken place, particularly with the introduction of micromobility devices throughout the city, which have all kinds of hazards for people who are pedestrians, whether they are in wheelchairs or whether they are blind and visually impaired or just elderly and frail. We are not thinking about how people with disability need to navigate and survive in a 21st century city with 21st century transport modalities. Nobody is doing that work, and it needs to be done.

MS CLAY: Mr Wallace, we will be seeing the planning minister later in the week. You have put a lot in your submission about planning and transport and how they affect people living with disabilities. Is there any key question we should put to the planning minister in that space, given the planning review?

Mr Wallace: How do we consult people with disabilities and how do we build social planning capacity and foresight so that we are thinking about all of the issues that I have just talked about in the past 10 minutes? Who is gazing across all of it, from the way that we are signing shared zones in the city, the way that we are supporting people through the introduction of electric vehicles, and policy around micromobility, and saying, "What does that mean for a person with a disability or an elderly person?" There are increasing numbers of them in Canberra. I have lots of numbers that I could share with you.

The story is that there are lots of frail people trying to navigate around our cities. Who is looking at planning from those people's points of view, and saying, "How do we create a city that works for them?" rather than just a city that works for a 20-something public servant with both legs working and who works in a couple of casual jobs? There are other people for whom this city needs to work, and we are not heading into a space where it will work for them. They are going to be excluded unless you do social planning work, which means building lived experience into the planning process and not just hearing from the usual voices, which sometimes include community councils that have a development focus. Nobody is talking to us. Please do so.

THE CHAIR: Mr Wallace, thank you for opening the batting for estimates hearings. It has been a pleasure to have you with us this morning. No questions were taken on notice. Thank you.

Mr Wallace: Thanks for the opportunity.

Short suspension.

BOWLES, DR DEVIN, Chief Executive Officer, ACTCOSS
ROBERTSON, MS GABRIELLE, Policy Officer, ACTCOSS

THE CHAIR: I welcome the representatives of ACTCOSS, Dr Devin Bowles and Ms Gabrielle Robertson. The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used the words, “I will take that question on notice.” This will help the committee and witnesses later to confirm questions taken on notice.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you please confirm, for the record, that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Dr Bowles: I understand.

Ms Robertson: I understand.

THE CHAIR: Dr Bowles, would you like to make an opening statement, before we proceed to ask questions?

Dr Bowles: I would like to thank the committee for inviting us to appear today. There are a number of positive measures in the budget. I wish particularly to highlight the significant investment in public housing, homelessness and mental health services, and expanded energy concessions.

Other major priorities for the community sector have not been addressed so well, including dedicated funding for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, and funding to implement the disability strategy and the disability health strategy. There were also limited investments in alcohol and other drug services.

THE CHAIR: That was a very succinct statement. We like that a lot. Page 8 of the ACTCOSS *2023 Cost of Living Report* states that the ACT is experiencing a cost of living crisis. Do you consider that the ACT government is doing enough to address that crisis in Canberra?

Dr Bowles: Thank you very much for that question. We note that a cost of living crisis affects many people. One of the really noticeable things about the current cost of living crisis is that not only are the people who have often experienced disadvantage in their lives for long periods of time being affected by the cost of living crisis, but many people who have never really seen themselves as requiring input from the community sector are now attending community sector services, including things like food banks, in an effort to keep themselves and their children fed.

The cost of living crisis is a substantial issue for the ACT. The ABC, in its reporting today on loneliness, has found that cost of living pressures contribute to what has been described by the US Surgeon General as a loneliness epidemic in much of the world, and that this loneliness epidemic causes physical ill health, not just psychological ill

health. People who are lonely, for instance, are dying sooner.

The most recent budget goes some way towards alleviating cost of living pressures. We know that cost of living pressures are being elevated for a range of reasons, some of which are international and some of which are national. Relatively few of the drivers emanate from the ACT itself.

Given that, the government has made some important investments in things like housing, as I noted in my opening statement. There is, however, more work to be done on this. In particular, we would like to see things like an update of the targeted assistance strategy, so that people who are doing it especially tough are better able to get on with their lives.

This budget has gone some way towards alleviating cost of living pressures. It is probably unrealistic to think that a territory government, on its own, can do that. Having said that, there is certainly more work for the government to do.

MS CLAY: Thank you, Dr Bowles and Ms Robertson, for coming in. Thank you for your pragmatic approach, too; it is very helpful.

You have a number of recommendations in your very detailed submission—and I thank you for that work—about planning and rezoning that will assist public and community housing. You have recommendations about meeting land release targets for our social and community housing, recommendations about rent remittance models, and recommendations similar to the one we heard recently from Mr Wallace about a social planning unit. There is quite a lot in here that might help with our housing crisis in the planning space. Are there any key points or key questions that we should pull out of that and put to the planning minister or our minister in charge of land releases later in the week, and say, “Here are some things you could do right now that would assist”?

Dr Bowles: One of the key things to keep in mind is that the supply of housing is absolutely an issue. Options to increase supply are absolutely essential. The government has noted several pathways by which it hopes to increase housing supply, and a multipronged approach is certainly welcome, from our perspective.

There is scope to increase the scale of investment in public and community housing. We note that this is just one budget. Given the scale of the mismatch between supply and demand, it is unrealistic to think that we will make up all of the ground in a single budget. ACTCOSS would call for several future budgets to have a scale of investment that is similar to or perhaps even greater than what has been announced in the most recent budget. But this budget, absolutely, was a very important first step.

Ms Robertson: In terms of the supply of public housing, we do also hold concerns about the drop in the number of public housing dwellings that are available. That is not likely to pick up until 2025. I am not a planning expert, so I cannot say exactly what the planners should be doing. However, something that is really important to keep in mind is swiftness of action that can be taken, in terms of getting as many people housed as possible in that interim period between now and 2025, when we can expect there to be a greater supply of public housing dwellings becoming available.

MS CLAY: Is it more likely to be beneficial for people living on low incomes if that housing, whether it is public housing, social housing or simply private rental housing that is available at a more affordable rent point, is more conveniently located within Canberra, near transport corridors, rather than simply having more supply on the outskirts of Canberra? Will it assist if we look at planning and zoning settings that allow more of that housing to be within Canberra?

Ms Robertson: I would say yes. As far as our policy work goes, we are in favour of expanding the ability to have higher density zoning in inner areas, and we do support the building of multi-unit dwellings in order to potentially bring down rental costs and increase supply for as many people as possible.

THE CHAIR: Dr Bowles, you were complimentary and optimistic about the investment in public housing. Given that there have been quite a number of budgets in a row where there has been investment and the promise of additional public housing but it seems to be kicked down the road a bit each year, are you genuinely optimistic that this investment will, in the shorter term, actually result in more public housing dwellings? Ms Robertson pointed out that the level of public housing over quite a number of years has actually declined. Do you have genuine optimism?

Dr Bowles: I do have genuine optimism over the medium term. Over the short term, of course, construction takes a while to complete, so I do not think there is any expectation that all of the houses or apartments that are forecast in the government's announcements will be built in the next year or even the next two years. But I do note the importance of housing as a bedrock to what the community sector as a whole does, and I urge the government to act as expeditiously as possible. For the community sector, when delivering social services to people, the ability to do that in an effective way is often substantially enhanced when people have stable housing.

MR PETTERSSON: What effect does the increased funding for the community sector in the form of a high indexation rate have?

Dr Bowles: An indexation rate that is commensurate with the cost pressures felt by the community sector is absolutely vital, because otherwise the community sector's capacity to deliver services to people who need it is slowly eroded through time; so an appropriate level of indexation is important.

MR CAIN: Thank you for your submission on behalf of ACTCOSS. One of your high priority recommendations under housing is to enable and empower community housing providers through access to and release of affordable land, rezoning and rates exemptions, including a few other things. How do you picture the government's current approach to the release of land directly to community housing providers, and how do you think that could be enhanced to provide more affordable housing in the ACT?

Ms Robertson: Again, I am not an expert on that policy area. However, I do believe that there were some issues around the types of zoning. In a broader sense, it is just a matter of bureaucracy and a matter of enablement; the government could be doing more to enable the relationship between land release, housing construction and

housing provision through community housing providers.

Dr Bowles: We will look at the details on that and take that question on notice.

MR CAIN: Thank you. Are you aware as to what degree government releases land to community housing providers right now? Is that something that you can speak to?

Ms Robertson: I cannot personally speak to the rates.

Dr Bowles: We will take that question on notice.

Ms Robertson: I am sure we have that.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: In your media release that was issued following the budget on 27 June, you stated:

However, with the exception of housing, the great majority of this investment appears to be an expansion of Government rather than in front line community services run by trusted non-profit organisations.

Are you able to elaborate on that statement?

Dr Bowles: Yes. In examining this budget, there is a great deal of additional investment or new investment. Looking through the budget, it appears that much of that, particularly in health but also in community services, will be for the government itself to provide services, rather than having the community sector provide services.

The community sector has some unique positioning within the community that enables it to deliver services in a way that is sometimes uniquely efficient because of the trust that some of the community sector organisations have. These are often organisations that have worked with families for decades or even generations, and which have an unparalleled understanding of those who are doing it tough in the ACT, not just at a theoretical or systems level but also with knowing about a family.

THE CHAIR: The genuine coalface.

Dr Bowles: Yes, the genuine coalface. Because of that, ACTCOSS thinks that many services to the community, especially those experiencing the greatest level of need, are best delivered by the community sector, so we call on the government to work in partnership with the community sector and to have greater engagement with the community sector about which organisations are delivering which services and making clear why those decisions are made.

MS CLAY: The cost of transport is becoming an increasing pressure for a lot of people, in addition to the cost of housing and the cost of food. You made some recommendations in the transport space, but there are a few things that I did not see in there. I am interested in whether you think they are an important part of the mix.

We have seen our bus services not really keeping pace with population change, and we are hearing a lot of complaints about that. Certain regions in Canberra are worse than others. We heard from Belconnen that west Belconnen is pretty poorly serviced. We have certain incentives for electric vehicles, but we do not have incentives for non-car electric vehicles, like electric motorbikes, scooters and e-bikes, which would be much cheaper for people who are concerned about the cost of those investments.

We have also seen some more investment in our cycling and walking paths, which is really great, but there is a pretty big lag on investment to get things up to the mark. Do you think we need more investment in public and active transport to help relieve those pressures?

Dr Bowles: I think more investment would be very welcome, and that relieving those pressures would be excellent. In terms of improving the quality of the public transport system, that would be excellent. In terms of incentives for other electric vehicles which are not car-type vehicles—scooters and the like—that would generally be welcome.

I would note one caveat, though, which is that the safety of some of those is not what it might be. We know that the introduction of e-scooters has led to a number of emergency room presentations. Giving thought to whether all classes of non car-like vehicles are equally safe would be worthwhile, in my view. It is about whether they are individually safe and, if we start seeing more of these at scale on bike paths, whether it means we need to expand the width of bike paths, recognising that there will be a greater mix of speeds and transport types on them.

THE CHAIR: We have come to the end of the session. Thank you so much for coming. You have taken a couple of questions on notice. If possible, please provide answers to the committee's secretary within five working days of receiving the uncorrected proof transcript, which will come soon. Thank you; I appreciate your time.

Dr Bowles: Thank you.

Short suspension.

VAN DER STERREN, MS ANKE, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA)

THE CHAIR: We now welcome Ms Anke van der Sterren, the Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT. The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and they will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses use the words, “I will take that question on notice,” because it helps the secretariat to confirm questions that have been taken on notice.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms van der Sterren: I understand those implications.

THE CHAIR: Ms van der Sterren, would you like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Ms van der Sterren: I would. Firstly, thank you very much for the invitation to appear here. ATODA welcomes the investments announced in the ACT 2023-24 budget in relation to the alcohol, tobacco and other drugs sector. In particular, ATODA welcomes the extension of the drug checking pilot in the ACT to December 2024. There is strong evidence that drug checking services reduce harm and promote access to health services, and that it is an important component of health service delivery.

We also welcome the extension and expansion of the drug and alcohol sentencing list and the investment in the Watson health precinct, particularly in relation to residential rehabilitation infrastructure for young people and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The investment in a review of the implementation of the Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2022 is also critical to ensure that this legislative reform reduces harm as intended.

We note that there is a significant unmet demand for alcohol, tobacco and other drug services in the ACT, with modelling indicating that up to 4,750 more people annually require treatment than are currently being treated through existing alcohol, tobacco and other drug services, and that this is an underestimate.

ATODA advised in our budget submission that \$12 million annually was needed as part of a stepped approach. We appreciate the ACT government’s commitment to responding to drug and alcohol use as a health issue, and the appropriate response to a health issue is investment in high quality, evidence-based treatment and harm reduction services.

We note that the commissioning process is underway, and we are hopeful that the commitment to co-design will result in an alcohol, tobacco and other drug service system in the ACT that is sustainably resourced to flexibly respond to emerging needs.

I am happy to answer any questions.

THE CHAIR: From reading your submission, and certainly from listening to your opening statement, I get the sense that you are quite pleased with the trajectory of this government in this space. I think you would always be advocating for more spending, but you are optimistic about the trajectory of the government in this space. Is that a fair assessment?

Ms van der Sterren: I think that is a fair assessment, yes. As I noted in my opening statement, we would welcome more investment.

THE CHAIR: When it comes to more investment, the submission narrows it down to a couple of areas. If you were signing off on a budget, and if you were assisting in constructing it, what would be the next big thing that you would advocate for? Where do you see the need for more spending in a specific area?

Ms van der Sterren: Specifically, across the service system we would welcome an additional investment, as I said, of \$12 million as a first approach, as a stepped approach. We would see that happening across the entire service system, not only focusing on residential rehabilitation but also on other treatment types, intervention types, including day programs, counselling and harm reduction services—across the entire service system. We would welcome that happening in a co-designed way, where the AOD services are involved in that process and are able to shape what that might look like.

THE CHAIR: Ms van der Sterren, there will be those watching who would say that these seem to be big numbers, but you do point to the Institute of Criminology finding on return on investment. I think people are surprised about it, when they hear it. Can you expand on that?

Ms van der Sterren: Absolutely. The Australian Institute of Criminology found that, for every dollar spent, there was a return on investment of \$5.40 for demand reduction programs, including specialist alcohol, tobacco and other drug services. Other studies prior to that have found a return on investment as high as \$7 for every dollar spent.

MS CLAY: The chair has stolen my question. Is that return on investment mostly in reduced emergency health services or is it in higher productivity?

Ms van der Sterren: I would have to take that on notice. I can get back to you about exactly what that is.

MS CLAY: Sure. I also note that in your submission you called for a fairly modest amount, \$400,000, for an evaluation of our new system. Has that been provided? Is there some measure in the budget to evaluate the new decrim?

Ms van der Sterren: There is a measure in the budget. I am not certain what the breakdown is, because there were three elements to that funding amount. I am not sure exactly what amount is allocated to it. Yes, we certainly welcome that, because it is very important to evaluate how that is going.

MR PETTERSSON: Can you quantify the unmet demand for alcohol, tobacco and

other drug services in the ACT?

Ms van der Sterren: Yes. Modelling was done in the Drug and Alcohol Services Planning Model, which was done by the drug policy modelling unit at the University of New South Wales. That was done in 2021, and it found that up to 4,750 more people annually require treatment than are currently being treated in our services, through the existing services. That is an investment gap of \$24 million per annum. That is actually an underestimate, because there were several factors that could not be taken into account.

MR PETTERSSON: What is the effect of that underfunding? What happens as a result of it?

Ms van der Sterren: As a result of that, people have to wait for a long time to get into services. Often, we know that people who are seeking services need them right away for it to be most effective, and we are just not able to provide that. People are often on waiting lists for months to be able to access counselling, residential rehabilitation, day programs and the like.

MR CAIN: As we are all aware, and touching on Mr Parton's question, the decriminalisation of possession of small quantities of hard drugs goes live later this year. What is your understanding of the readiness of the government, in terms of support services in particular, once that law becomes effective?

Ms van der Sterren: I think we are all waiting to see how that goes. I think we are all ready to support that process. I know that there is a group looking at how to make everybody ready to be able to work through how that will operate, and services are ready to support that. I think that is why the evaluation is so important. This is such an innovative thing that we are doing in the ACT that it will be really important to see how that goes and to monitor and measure that readiness.

MR CAIN: Are you aware of anything that is set up or about to be set up now, as opposed to the law becoming live and then, as you said, seeing how it goes?

Ms van der Sterren: Do you mean drug and alcohol services themselves?

MR CAIN: Yes, from the government—any government programs or new government approaches. Is there anything that you are aware of that is being shaped right now?

Ms van der Sterren: I know that drug and alcohol services are continuing to be involved and consulted with in terms of how that will be implemented. I am not certain of any specific additional support or funding, but I can get back to you about that. I can take that on notice and get back to you on that.

MR CAIN: That would be good—again, your awareness, as a peak body in this area.

Ms van der Sterren: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I am interested in your responses to those questions. Obviously, you

see the changes here as innovative and quite positive.

Ms van der Sterren: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Is there not a concern that if you, as the peak body, are not aware of additional structures that are put in place to deal with that change—sure, we are about to suck it and see—we might end up seeing some circumstances arise that are suboptimal?

Ms van der Sterren: I should clarify that ATODA has been involved with an implementation group. This is my first day as Acting CEO, so I have not been—

THE CHAIR: Is that right? Welcome to the job!

Ms van der Sterren: I have not been involved in that; because it is confidential, I am not privy to what has gone on within those proceedings. I can get back to you on that. I will take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: All right; thank you.

MS CLAY: Are there any other areas of alcohol, drug and tobacco use that the ACT should be looking at more? We have done a fair bit of work on decriminalisation, but there is vaping, and there are the more traditional drugs. Are there any gaps in our current policy or in our current funding arrangements that we need to look at?

Ms van der Sterren: I think that a focus on core service delivery would be very welcome, which is why we make our call for the additional investment of \$12 million. You mentioned e-cigarettes, for example. Clearly, we support regulation that keeps e-cigarettes out of the hands of young people; and we support young people being able to stop using those, if they have already started. Also, we should not drop the ball on tobacco. With tobacco use, although it is very low in the ACT, and nationally as well, there are about 30,000 people in the ACT who are still smoking cigarettes. We should not drop the ball on supporting those people to be able to quit smoking, if they would like to.

THE CHAIR: It is a small number, isn't it? When you consider it, our journey in that space is fascinating.

MR PETTERSON: For many years, we have been trialling drug checking services in the ACT, first at musical festivals and now at a fifth site. We have just extended the trial. Are there benefits to this service becoming permanent?

Ms van der Sterren: There are definitely benefits. We have already found, in the evaluation that has happened, that over 80 per cent of service users accepted a drug and alcohol or a healthcare intervention, and 62 per cent of service users noted that it was the first time they had actually been asked about their alcohol and other drug use and been given an intervention about it. We believe that it plays a critical role within a suite of interventions for people who are using alcohol and other drugs and that there is definitely ongoing value to that being part of the service system.

MR PETTERSON: Coming to the crux of my question, it is seemingly a trial. It

keeps getting extended. Should it become permanent?

Ms van der Sterren: We believe that it should become permanent, yes. You would not be surprised to hear that. It is a really critical part of the entire service system. It plays a role in alerting us to drugs of concern in the community, that are circulating in the community. It provides an important touchpoint for people to the service system who can then be referred to other interventions within the service system. It is valuable in reducing harms in the community.

MR CAIN: There is some additional resourcing for the drug and alcohol sentencing list.

Ms van der Sterren: Yes.

MR CAIN: Is that program working effectively? What kinds of things could enhance it, apart from, of course, extra money? What is your evaluation of that program at the moment?

Ms van der Sterren: We read it as working very well. The evaluation around that was very positive. We would encourage future evaluation to include looking at the alcohol and other drug interventions as an outcome measure and how those are working. Currently, the evaluation very clearly shows some positive outcomes around reducing recidivism and making other improvements in the lives of people who come into contact with that system. We would welcome having a look at alcohol and other drug outcomes as well, as part of that intervention. We see it as working well, so we welcome the investment for the additional seven places, I think it is, in the drug and alcohol sentencing list.

MR CAIN: Are there any features that you think could be added to that sentencing list that might enhance it?

Ms van der Sterren: Can I take that on notice and get back to you? It is not my area of expertise.

MR CAIN: Sure.

MS CLAY: Looking at the alcohol and drug sentencing, that was reported to have saved more money than its operating costs in avoiding imprisonment and recidivism, which I was interested in. If you come across any information in that realm, we would love to see it.

Ms van der Sterren: Absolutely. I will add that, too.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. That is a good first day! You have taken some questions on notice. Could you provide answers to the committee secretary within five working days of receiving the uncorrected proof transcript? Many thanks.

Ms van der Sterren: Thank you very much.

Short suspension.

HOPKINS, MR MICHAEL, Chief Executive Officer, Master Builders ACT

THE CHAIR: We welcome Mr Michael Hopkins from the Master Builders Association of the ACT. Proceedings are being broadcast live to the massive audience! The proceedings today are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses use these words: “I will take that question on notice.” This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm later. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw attention to the privilege statement. Mr Hopkins, could you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it.

Mr Hopkins: Yes. I understand and agree.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Mr Hopkins: Just briefly, I would like to highlight a number of points about the budget for the committee. First of all, we strongly welcome the large investment in infrastructure spending that is included in this budget—\$6.5 billion over four years. One point that we were particularly pleased to see was that the budget papers report on what was actually delivered last year. It showed that, as a combined industry, we delivered more than a billion dollars worth of infrastructure. We think that should prove to the government that our industry certainly has capacity to deliver an infrastructure program of more than a billion dollars a year, because the budget papers show that we did that last year, and government should have confidence that we can do that into future years.

We were somewhat concerned, when we unpacked that \$6.5 billion, to find that only \$144 million worth of construction works comprise new works next year—\$144 million across more than 6,000 businesses, a workforce of 15,000 to 20,000 people, is not a large opportunity for new tendering opportunities next year.

We were also very disappointed again to see no increase in apprenticeship funding this year—not even a CPI increase—but we were particularly surprised and concerned to see a funding cut to the Women in Construction program, which has been highly successful in attracting women to the construction industry through prevocational programs. In our experience, in the programs we have run, it has delivered very high employment rates. That program, over the past four years, had been funded by the ACT government and, in recent years, also the federal government. We are very disappointed to see a cut to that program.

In terms of housing, our take on this budget is that this budget will both add costs and reduce the supply of housing—exactly the opposite to what we should be doing. It adds costs because it increases the lease variation charge by \$10,000 in the first year and, I think, up to \$55,000 over five years. That will add costs to any new residential construction in the territory and it also reduces supply. Even though the four-year land release program covers nearly 17,000 dwellings, which is pretty consistent with what has been promised over the past four or five years, if you look at what is to be delivered in the first two years of that, it is significantly lower than in previous years.

In fact, only 11 per cent of the land release that is promised will be delivered in the first year. That is the lowest that we could find of any land release program in the past five years.

Finally, just a point on transparency for the budget: maybe the committee could recommend or consider recommending ways to improve transparency in future years. As an industry association, we were given a half-hour briefing on this budget. Previously, there would have been a three- or four-hour open budget lock-up session, where we would be given access to ministers, heads of directorates and Treasury officials to ask questions and to understand this better. This year, that was replaced with a half-hour briefing session. That is hardly a very substantial opportunity to understand this budget, which comprises more than a thousand pages. For this inquiry, I have been given 15 minutes to talk. In previous years, that would have been at least half an hour. There is no longer an opportunity for written submissions to be made to the inquiry.

Over the past few years, we have seen that the transparency and openness of the budget has diminished. I point out, though, that the consultation that we had with Treasury officers was exceptional this year. There was a genuine desire by them, in the lead-up to the budget, to understand the issues that were affecting our industry. We very much supported the consultation that we got from Treasury before the budget was released.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Your media release on 27 June stated:

... the ACT budget fails to explain where the skilled workforce will come from to deliver more housing and infrastructure to support the ACT's growth ...

To some extent, you already expanded on that statement in your opening statement, but are you able to elaborate further?

Mr Hopkins: Master Builders released a report earlier this year, in April, which shows that we need 7,000 new construction workers in the ACT alone between now and November 2026 to deliver the construction work that is forecast. The budget, like I said, does not contain any new programs or any additional funding to skill those workers, so our question is: with no programs and no funding, how are we going to find those 7,000 workers? We know from the National Skills Commission, which released a report a few years ago that looked at the level of subsidies provided for the top 10 most common VET courses—which included the cert III in carpentry and the cert III in plumbing—that the ACT was providing the lowest level of subsidy of any state or territory. Clearly, funding for vocational programs needs to be increased, particularly for the construction industry, which relies heavily on vocational education, as opposed to university degrees, to find its future workforce.

THE CHAIR: Is that shortage of skilled workforce being felt now? There was a post that I saw late last week on LinkedIn from Stephanie Davies, who refers to some Australia Bureau of Statistics figures on building approvals. She points out that, although a number of other states had increases, we had a 32 per cent decline in building approvals month to month. She said, “We have so many clients looking for turnkey homes without the construction headache.” She said, “This tells me that

limited supply, when met with increased demand for new quality homes, can only drive up home values.” That sounds like disaster is coming.

Mr Hopkins: In the ACT, it should concern the government that our residential building approvals are declining. We have delivered a total of 5,008 residential dwellings in the year to March 2023. Our analysis shows that, to deliver the ACT’s share of the one million homes that the national housing report requires, we should be delivering between 5,800 and 6,380. In the year to March 2023, we have delivered only 5,000 of those. Like I said, according to the budget papers, our land release is going to decline in future years, not increase. Yes; it should be a major concern to the territory that, in the middle of a housing crisis, when, I think, all stakeholders agree that supply is a major part of the solution, we are not releasing more land and looking at ways to reduce the cost of housing. This budget is doing the exact opposite.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hopkins.

MS CLAY: Mr Hopkins, your submission calls for a lot of things and you have just restated them again: new land release, RZ1 rezoning, and future new suburb investigations to be sped up. Your submission also explains very clearly that one of the biggest constraints in the speed at which we are getting new housing is absolute limits on labour and supplies, so, quite apart from anything government does, we have limitations on who can build them and what they can build them from. It strikes me: if you have an absolute upper limit on capacity, would it not be better for government to work out where we want the housing rather than pursue all three types of land release, new investigation areas and RZ1 zoning? Would it be better for government to be a bit more targeted in saying, “We need new housing. The quickest way to build new housing is here and let us get on with that”?

Mr Hopkins: You have raised quite a few issues in that question. Let me try to address all of them. In terms of the type of housing that we should be building and where they should be built, our view would be that they should be built on an assessment of what the future community needs, not necessarily the quickest to build. There should be a housing assessment done for the ACT that maps out the type of housing we need and where it should be built. That is what we should be working towards and that should be set out in the ACT’s Territory Plan.

In terms of labour capacity, we are asked the question about industry capacity a lot, which is why I pointed out in my opening statement that we have actually delivered more than \$1 billion worth of infrastructure, which is more than we delivered in previous years. Our concern around labour capacity in the residential sector is that, with residential approvals dropping so low, we will very quickly move from having supply constraints in that sector of the overall industry to having excess capacity. I think there is an opportunity in the short term, with private building approvals dropping so low, for government to jump in and invest in public housing and social and affordable housing to utilise the \$50 million that the federal government has provided through the accelerator fund over the next two years. That is a great opportunity to replace the declining private sector residential approvals with publicly funded housing so that we do not move from under-capacity of labour to the opposite position in the residential sector. Our fear, in fact, is that, if we do not address this issue in the short term, we may see increased insolvencies among our residential

builders because residential approvals are dropping as low as they are.

MS CLAY: You have also noted some really good transparency measures in your submission: we should set annual housing targets and report against them; we should disaggregate that by infill and green fill, which strikes me as very sensible; and we should report against permitted density and density types. Do you think that those reporting measures would also help us to get a realistic understanding of what is actually happening and where we need to go next?

Mr Hopkins: Absolutely. If the ACT Infrastructure Plan were coordinated with the ACT Territory Plan, then I think the community could get a good review not only on where future development is going to be but also what future infrastructure will be provided to support that growth. It is really important that the Infrastructure Plan and the Territory Plan work hand in glove.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: You have expressed concern about the removal of programs to attract more women to the construction industry. How would you like to see more women brought to the construction industry?

Mr Hopkins: One measure would be with the continuation of those programs. We had been running, with ACT government support, women in civil construction and women in trades programs. We ran a prevocational program—the aim being that, at the completion of our program, women would be able to either find direct employment or start an apprenticeship in a particular construction trade. Those programs relied on a level of government support. Without that government support, they are going to be much harder to run. One way that we can attract more women to the construction industry is by reinstating those programs in the ACT budget.

MR PETTERSSON: Have you considered project-specific quotas for women in the construction industry?

Mr Hopkins: The ACT government has just finished consultation on measures like that. The point that we made in our submission, apart from being highly supportive of measures that attract more women to the construction industry, is that, before government introduces quotas or targets, or anything like that, it needs to have measures for training more young women to enter the industry in the first place. There is no point in the government just mandating that we need, for example, a 10-year experienced female construction worker if we have not done the early efforts to identify those people, train them and get them working in the industry so that one day they can be a 10-year experienced construction worker. That is why we were so concerned to see the Women in Construction program cut from this budget, because that would directly work against the type of policy outcome that you are asking me about.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

MR CAIN: The Chief Minister has said, on more than one occasion, that the government's land release program for stand-alone housing does not significantly

impact the price of stand-alone housing. Do you have a view on that?

Mr Hopkins: Quite simply, if you restrict the supply of housing, that is going to push up the price of housing. We have seen that year on year in the ACT. That is why we are so concerned to see, in year one of the land release program—that is, the current financial year—only 1,883 dwellings being released. That is 11 per cent of the overall program, which is about half of what is typically released in the first year by land release programs. Of course restricting the supply of residential dwellings will have an impact on price. As I said in my opening statement, it is precisely the opposite to what we think we should be doing with measures to boost supply and not restrict supply further.

MR CAIN: The government's Indicative Land Release Program speaks of how many thousands of dwellings they are issuing. Do you think they have the balance right between apartment dwellings versus stand-alone housing dwellings?

Mr Hopkins: Similarly to Ms Clay's question, we believe the answer is in an assessment of the future ACT community's need, not necessarily an arbitrary 70 or 80 or 10 or 20 per cent. There should be an analysis of the demographics of the ACT and projections going forward to understand what that exact picture is. We know that, when the government asks our industry to deliver more infill dwellings, it certainly will. There is lots of opportunity to deliver more infill dwellings around existing infrastructure as opposed to releasing more land, but ultimately there should be a balance of both new greenfield and infill dwellings being constructed. But we need the planning rules to enable us to build those in the first place, and that is why we are currently sitting on the edge of our seats waiting for the new Territory Plan to be released.

MR CAIN: Regarding the analysis that you mentioned, are you thinking of a Winton style survey again to check the expectations and desires of the ACT community?

Mr Hopkins: Yes. Those sorts of studies should be undertaken regularly to make sure that our planning policies are aligning with what the future needs of our community are.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: In closing, Mr Hopkins—and I know we have spent a great deal of the time that we have had here today talking about the question mark over the skilled workforce—I just want to get to a definitive question. Does the ACT have a workforce that is capable of building the homes needed to address the current housing crisis in Canberra?

Mr Hopkins: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: So we do have a workforce that is capable of—

Mr Hopkins: But we are going to need more, Mr Parton. The population is growing. The budget papers show that over the next two years we have record population growth of more than 10,000 people here—

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Hopkins: so, while we have proved that we delivered a billion dollars in infrastructure last year, we cannot rest on our laurels. We need to continue to invest in skills so that we are growing our construction workforce so that we can meet those future needs. We will just be relying on importing interstate workers into the ACT, taking the jobs of local workers, if we do not have that local investment in skills that we have been calling for for many years.

THE CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Hopkins. I think we are done. I think you did take something on notice, did you not?

Mr Hopkins: I do not think so.

THE CHAIR: Did you not? Maybe it was someone else. Sorry.

Mr Hopkins: I tried my hardest not to.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you.

Short suspension.

EDWARDS, MS MARIA, Chief Executive Officer, Real Estate Institute of the ACT

THE CHAIR: We welcome Ms Maria Edwards from the Real Estate Institute of the ACT. The proceedings are being broadcast live and they are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. When taking questions on notice, it would be useful if witnesses use the words, “I will take that question on notice.” This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm later. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw attention to the privilege statement. Ms Edwards, could you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms Edwards: I do understand and I agree.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Do you have an opening statement for us before we proceed with questions?

Ms Edwards: Sure. I want to concentrate today on the change in the budget in relation to eligibility for the Sustainable Household Scheme. The Sustainable Household Scheme was established to assist homeowners to economically upgrade their homes through interest-free loans through the ACT government partner, Brighte. On 1 April 2023 minimum standards legislation commenced, requiring landlords in the ACT to comply with minimum standards for home insulation, specifically. From this date, landlords with properties identified as not meeting the minimum standards are required to upgrade their insulation within nine months of a new tenancy agreement being signed on the property or by November 2026, whichever occurs first. At the commencement of the legislation, there was only one qualified insulation installer in the ACT: Alexander Watson.

Landlords and agents were advised there would be more installers available and, once they had received certification from the EEC in the interim, to comply with the legislation, landlords and agents were to seek quotes from Alexander Watson and be scheduled, but they were advised there was a six- to nine-month wait for installation. EPSDD advised REI ACT that the intention for allowing the nine months grace period was that there would be an anticipated increase in installers, thereby giving landlords a choice and opportunity to seek extra quotes before selecting an installer. It was not until June 2023—a couple of weeks ago—that two more installers received EEC certification and were added to the list of installers.

The budget amended eligibility for the Sustainable Household Scheme interest-free loans to stand-alone properties that have a UV of under \$750,000 in 2022, compared to the previous eligibility of \$750,000 in 2020. That means that a whole lot of properties that would have qualified for the Brighte sustainable housing loans will now not qualify for them because there has been a huge increase in UVs in the ACT in the past couple of years. This has directly impacted landlords with rental properties that are currently not compliant with the minimum standards who, through no fault of their own, were unable to upgrade their properties prior to the change in eligibility and are therefore being disadvantaged with the new UV eligibility.

I went to Allhomes after I found out about the change and, within 10 minutes, I came up with three properties that were below the median weekly rents for the areas. We

are not talking about big properties in expensive areas. The three that I picked were in Deakin, Downer and Chifley. They were three-bedroom, one-bathroom homes. For example, for one of them, on Antill Street, Downer, the 2020 unimproved value was \$477,000, so they would have qualified for an interest-free loan. In 2022, their unimproved value was \$754,000, so they are automatically exempt from getting an interest-free loan to update. They are identified. I have copies of the ads showing that they do not qualify. Their properties are required to be upgraded. These are modest family homes in good areas which are ideal for renters.

The large increase in UVs in inner areas is really making it difficult for landlords to upgrade. The cost of insulation upgrades is treated as capital work for tax purposes. They cannot just claim the amount for the insulation straightaway; it has to be over a number of years. Landlords have no choice but to upgrade the insulation. It is different for owner-occupiers, in that owner-occupiers can choose if they can afford it or if they cannot afford it. Landlords have to do it.

The issue is that landlords have not had a chance to have quotes done and are automatically becoming ineligible for interest-free loans. One of the ways that the ACT government sold the change in the legislation to landlords was by saying, “You will be able to get an interest-free loan to actually make this happen,” and now a number of them will not be able to.

THE CHAIR: Ms Edwards, the vast majority of landlords in the ACT are commonly referred to as mum-and-dad type landlords who have one or two properties. How are they responding to this, either anecdotally or in actual data? What are they going to do?

Ms Edwards: The concern generally in the industry and anecdotally is that they will have to sell their properties. Interest rates have gone up. Rents in the ACT are actually going down. We are one of the few territories where rents are actually reducing. With interest rates going up, land tax and rates going up, and rents going down, we in the ACT have the second-highest vacancy rate in Australia. It is a difficult time for landlords and, on top of it, they have to come up with the cash. Mum-and-dad landlords maybe have one property, as well as their own home, and if interest rates are going up on both of them, they are going to have to sell them, basically.

THE CHAIR: Who is going to buy those properties?

Ms Edwards: If they are in the areas where the land values are high, obviously the sale price of these properties is not going to be in the first-time buyer realm. If your UV is \$750,000 and you add a house to it, you are looking at well over a million dollars for these properties, so they are not going to be bought by first home buyers; they may be bought by other landlords with a lot more money or—who knows—they might just sit there empty, or they could be converted to Airbnbs, basically.

THE CHAIR: Was REIACT consulted prior to the budget as to the changes to this scheme and the impact, given that you had been instrumental in informing the industry of the changes to residential tenancies?

Ms Edwards: No. We heard nothing, and that was very disappointing because, when

the changes to the Residential Tenancies Act came up, we were proactive in that we set up webinars. We not only informed our members, but we informed every other landlord who wanted to know about it. We worked with EPSDD; we worked with JACS. We got the information out there. Even though we only had nine days from when the legislation was approved to when it was enacted, we got on the front foot to try to help landlords and the industry, and also to help smooth the path a bit for the government. Then this came in with no consultation. Regarding the impact, considering we literally had only one installer, who had a monopoly on the installation of the insulation, and the big time lag between when somebody could get a quote done or identify their property and when they could get the installation installed, it was really disappointing for us.

THE CHAIR: All right. Did I hear your voice, Mr Pettersson?

MR PETTERSSON: Yes. I will contain myself.

THE CHAIR: Ms Clay?

MS CLAY: I am happy to focus on the issue you have raised. I think that is a good use of your time here. You said that if a landlord cannot afford to install the insulation and cannot access a government loan, they might sell or maybe just leave it empty. Would it really be in their financial interest to leave it empty? That strikes me as unusual.

Ms Edwards: Not so much leave it empty but they could put it on the Airbnb market. If you have an increased cost on your property, you will potentially want to recoup it by rent. If you increase the rent at the moment, and the rental market is falling, the property is going to sit there empty. For a proportion of landlords at the moment, rents are coming down, their costs are going up and they are hoping that people will come. A lot fewer people came to Canberra this year than in the past. That has actually impacted on vacancy rates, as well. It is very unusual. I have been in rentals for nearly 20 years and this is the toughest start to a year that I have ever seen in the market.

MS CLAY: Are you concerned that there is likely to be an increase in short-term rentals because that market is currently unregulated?

Ms Edwards: One hundred per cent.

MS CLAY: That is an interesting point. We have put Sustainable Household Scheme questions to the Treasurer repeatedly and I feel like I can hear what his answer is likely to be before I ask him. He says that often people who have a large asset like a house and are not eligible under the current threshold can access a green loan from a bank. Are you finding that, for some reason, it is not available to people who have a second or third home and they are not able to do that?

Ms Edwards: With interest rates going up, people's eligibility to actually borrow against their property has changed dramatically. Just because you have an asset that is worth a lot in land does not mean that it is worth a lot in rent. It depends on the area and the size of the house. It is very disproportionate. There is land tax, for example. There is what you pay on a property in Deakin versus what you pay in Gungahlin.

Your cashflow is very different. As I said, at the moment we are finding that people are not going to be able to afford it in the long run. They are getting tight on their own mortgage, as well as the mortgage on their rental properties.

MS CLAY: Just to be clear on the insulation, we are talking about investment properties worth over \$750,000.

Ms Edwards: Where the UV is over \$750,000.

MS CLAY: Yes—the unimproved value is over \$750,000. They are not eligible for a Sustainable Household Scheme loan. What you are saying is that they would not be able to install insulation. They have been able to run the house in an unfit-for-living state, without insulation, but they are no longer able to install insulation. Is that the situation?

Ms Edwards: It is just another expense on top for landlords at a time when interest rates are high, rents are going down and people have to make hard decisions about whether they can hang onto the property.

MS CLAY: Sure. The logical outcome is that they might sell the house and somebody else might buy it, or they might leave it empty, in which case they would probably put it on—

Ms Edwards: Probably not leave it empty. That would mean that—

MS CLAY: They are probably not going to leave it empty, so they are going to sell the house or it is going to go on to short-term rentals.

Ms Edwards: Yes. That will affect supply in the long run. At the moment, we are almost in the space where there is a bit of supply out there. Obviously, rents are coming down and there are vacant properties out there: but if people start selling them, we are going to be back where we started, with high rents and tight supply.

THE CHAIR: Mr Pettersson.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you. Circling back to something that you mentioned earlier, can you quantify the number of landlords that are selling because of the increasing cost pressures?

Ms Edwards: At the moment, there is the lag. They have the nine months between when the tenant signs the lease and when they have the insulation done, and it is only since April that this new law came in. We are going to do some quantitative research on it. I have been anecdotally talking to agents. A large proportion of the people listing their properties for sale at the moment are investors. I cannot tell you exact numbers. I am happy to keep you informed of that, but that is from talking to people on the ground—that it is the investors that are getting out of the market.

MR PETTERSSON: I have a follow-up. Is there a housing crisis in the ACT? We have heard from previous witnesses that there is not enough land and there are not enough houses, and I am hearing here that we have a vacancy rate that most of the

country would dream about.

Ms Edwards: The market at the moment—exactly right.

MR PETTERSSON: Here in the ACT, is there a housing crisis?

Ms Edwards: There is a crisis in social and affordable housing—absolutely. We are in a little bubble at the moment. We are not in as difficult a position as the rest of the country. You have to look at it in the long term and the short term. Potentially, in the short term it is not a crisis at the moment, as far as rents are going, because, as I said, they are coming down and there is a decent vacancy rate out there; but we need to look at the long term and affordable housing, as well.

MR PETTERSSON: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: Ms Edwards, with regard to the suite of changes to residential tenancy laws in the past three or four years—and you are representing the Real Estate Institute, so I understand that I am asking you a question that potentially runs against the narrative that you would like to portray—have those changes made this place a bad investment place for rental properties?

Ms Edwards: Compared to other states, the laws that we have can be a disincentive for people. If you are looking for a state to invest in, it can be a disincentive. We are yet to see the most recent laws play out. There is a lot of trepidation about what is going to happen with the end of no-cause evictions et cetera. We have not had them played out through ACAT yet, so we do not really know what the impact will be, but there are obviously a lot more controls in the ACT than there are in other states.

I have heard from many landlords anecdotally over the past couple of years. I have been in this role for six months. Prior to that, I was in affordable housing and prior to that I was in mainstream housing, so I have had a lot of exposure. A lot of landlords are getting to the last straw and want to get out of the market.

THE CHAIR: How do you think that disincentivisation to invest will ultimately affect the longer term pipeline of new properties that are specifically being built as rental properties?

Ms Edwards: Obviously, the goal is always for people to own property—for first-time buyers et cetera to be able to afford properties. There is always also going to be a proportion of people who have to rent out their property because they get posted overseas or they move to another state. There is always a proportion of renters in the ACT who moved to the ACT and think they will live here for 12 months, so they rent a property and then they move away again, so they do not actually invest in housing in the ACT. Having limited supply for those types of tenants is obviously going to be detrimental and, for the long term, it is an issue.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Ms Edwards, you have done well in your first estimates hearing.

Ms Edwards: Thank you. I do not know if you want the report or anything like that,

but I have prepared it all, if you want the evidence of the properties that I brought up. I have reports if you want them.

THE CHAIR: Do we have to go through a process? Do we need Ms Edwards to table those?

Ms Edwards: I am not sure how it works.

MS CLAY: It would be helpful if we can have it tabled.

Ms Edwards: I can email it if that is easier.

THE CHAIR: You have a hard copy here.

Ms Edwards: Yes. I have hard copies.

THE CHAIR: I am happy for them to be tabled.

Ms Edwards: I will learn these processes.

MS CLAY: As will we!

THE CHAIR: It says here: “Does the committee wish to further consider this supplementary submission prior to receipt and publishing?”

MR PETTERSSON: No. I am happy to receive it.

THE CHAIR: This supplementary submission will be considered at the next private meeting of the committee. Thank you.

Ms Edwards: Thank you. It is basically a summary of what I said.

THE CHAIR: Thanks, Maria. Did you specifically take anything on notice? I do not think so.

Ms Edwards: No.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, thanks for attending today.

Ms Edwards: Thanks so much.

Short suspension.

BOLTON, MS GENEVIEVE, Executive Director and Principal Solicitor, Canberra Community Law

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to this public hearing for estimates 2023-24. In this session, we will speak with Ms Genevieve Bolton, Executive Director of Canberra Community Law. Welcome. The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings are also being transcribed. They will be published on the Assembly website. When taking questions on notice, it would be useful if you could make that clear: “I will take that question on notice.” I remind Ms Bolton of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw attention to the privilege statement. Are you able to confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms Bolton: Yes; I do.

THE CHAIR: Ms Bolton, I know that you are having some computer issues, but would you like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Ms Bolton: Yes; I would. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. Canberra Community Law is an independent community legal centre that provides specialist legal services to people on low incomes and those facing significant barriers to accessing the justice system. CCL is the only free legal service in the ACT that provides specialist legal services in the areas of homelessness, public housing and social security law. We also specialise in disability and race discrimination law. In addition, we provide a range of specialist programs to groups of people who, based on our experience and legal research, face additional barriers to accessing the justice system. We assist people to have their basic needs met, such as safe and secure housing and access to income support.

CCL welcomes a range of measures in the budget, including additional funding to some free legal assistance providers—the Human Rights Commission and ACAT—cost-of-living support for people on low incomes, and mental health funding. CCL also welcomes funding for 140 new public housing dwellings and investment in Housing ACT’s maintenance and related systems and processes, but we continue to make the observation that the ACT’s social housing systems continue to be under significant strain. There continues to be a severe shortage of crisis public housing and other social housing in the ACT, as reflected by the ongoing pressures on OneLink, the social housing waiting list and the number of people contacting us for assistance who are in dire housing situations.

Costs-of-living pressures will continue to put significant pressure on the ACT’s limited housing resources. Accessing and navigating the social housing process has become increasingly complex over recent years and it often requires the assistance of specialist housing lawyers to get people housed and get essential property maintenance requests done. Increased, continued and sustained investment in these housing areas is required over future budgets.

CCL continues to experience high levels of demand across its services, but particularly in housing law services. We do not anticipate any appreciable reduction in the foreseeable future, and, if anything, CCL’s services are likely to continue to be

under more pressure as cost-of-living increases continue to hit. Recent residential tenancy changes are also likely to impact on CCL's workload. Also, there continues to be strong demand for our duty lawyer services in ACAT to assist vulnerable tenants to defend eviction proceedings. Due to the high numbers of public housing matters going through ACAT at present, both CCL and Housing ACT are currently in discussions with ACAT about how this increase can be managed. In fact, we have a meeting tomorrow with ACAT in relation to that issue.

Unfortunately, the workload pressures on CCL were not recognised in the recent ACT budget in the form of additional funding. CCL was able to secure additional one-off funding in the last financial year, but this funding has now ended and has placed the equivalent of at least two full-time legal positions at risk. Without any additional funding, these positions will be lost through staff attrition. This will reduce CCL's capacity to provide legal services to some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of the community and at a time when the community is under significant financial, living and housing pressures. This reduced capacity will have significant impact on clients, including high risk of eviction, prolonged waiting times for housing, and housing need being incorrectly classified in public housing lists. Those are just some of the issues that will be faced. Over recent years, we have also consistently advocated for the need for a specialist disability law service and believe that this continues to be needed. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bolton. Given the magnitude of the cost-of-living crisis and the impact that it is having on the demand for services for Canberra Community Law, you must be somewhat incredulous at the fact that there is not even talk about additional funding or even the same level of funding for you to continue the work that you are doing in the community. Are you dismayed by that?

Ms Bolton: I should probably make it really clear that the additional one-off funding we got last financial year was not from the ACT government; it was from the commonwealth government, through the National Legal Assistance Partnership agreement. In recent years, we have received additional funding from the ACT government. It was originally under COVID-related measures and has been continued for another two years—about \$340,000, which is the equivalent of about three full-time legal positions.

In our early discussions with the ACT government, I think it is fair to say that the impression that was conveyed to us was that, because we had the benefit of significant additional funding from the ACT government in the past couple of years, it was unlikely that we would receive further funding in this year's budget. Notwithstanding that, the pressure is real. As the head of an organisation that provides legal services to very disadvantaged and vulnerable people, I also face the additional challenge of managing the overall wellbeing of staff.

THE CHAIR: I can imagine.

Ms Bolton: CCL staff are very dedicated people. They work a lot of hours in addition to what the centre can pay, because of their commitment to assist people who are in really dire situations. In terms of our ongoing discussions with the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal, they are experiencing an increase in the number of

applications being made.

THE CHAIR: Why are they?

Ms Bolton: It is not entirely clear to me, but I would suspect part of the rationale for the increase is the cost-of-living pressures. Public housing tenants, even though they are, by and large, on rebated rents, they are on incredibly low incomes, so it is a constant juggle to be able to meet the basic living expenses, and that impacts on the capacity to meet rent as well.

The discussion tomorrow is going to be around: is it possible for CCL to staff an additional list at ACAT? But those matters are currently dealt with on a Thursday. The duty lawyer service initially started as Thursday morning, but it basically goes all day at the moment, and that is why ACAT wants to have the conversation in terms of: is it going to be possible for CCL and Housing ACT to also assist in matters that are on another day?

THE CHAIR: Ms Bolton, you must face situations all the time when decisions have to be made as to who gets on the life raft, because not everyone can fit.

Ms Bolton: Yes—that is absolutely correct. We make those decisions every single day, but the reality is that a lot of the people who contact us require intensive ongoing legal support if their matter is going to be successfully resolved. In the case of eviction matters before the tribunal, you just have to find the ability to be able to assist people, because, if you do not assist them, there is a high risk that they will be evicted. We are talking about people who often have poor literacy, often have mental health issues, are experiencing family violence—a whole raft of issues that makes it really difficult for them to be able to deal with a legal matter, unless they have access to representation.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CLAY: I want to reflect on that information to make sure that we have it straight. At the moment, CCL has a duty lawyer day on Thursday and ACAT is now talking to you about maybe needing other duty lawyer days.

Ms Bolton: They want to explore that with us in a meeting tomorrow.

MS CLAY: That is good to know. It is mostly because of ACT Housing matters and evictions matters, public housing matters?

Ms Bolton: Yes.

MS CLAY: Thank you for explaining the funding situation and the commonwealth and ACT funding situation. I am sorry to hear about the two FTEs at risk. Thank you for giving us the information. You provide an excellent service, and your lawyers are working hard and at a rate much cheaper than they would earn in the private sector. The service and the dedication cannot be questioned.

We have heard a lot about public and community housing already today—the lack of

public and community housing. Interestingly, we heard from the Real Estate Institute and the Master Builders Association, and both called for more public and community housing rather than just more housing. Is some of the increase in need simply because there is not enough public and community housing? Would some of the legal need be met if we were providing better housing needs?

Ms Bolton: Definitely. There is obviously a correlation. The market has tightened and, over that period of time, there has been a decrease in public housing stock. We see people now who we would not have seen before. We see people now who are sitting on the priority housing list, the most urgent housing list, and have been sitting there for very long periods of time, and they are absolutely desperate to get some housing. They have been waiting years in really dire situations. People are contacting us for advocacy to try to push the allocation process forward. That would not have been the case five or 10 years ago. They would have been sitting on the public housing list and would have been housed within a reasonable period of time.

The other major structural issue at the moment in the public housing system is the relationship between Housing ACT and their contractor programs. I am not sure whether any of the additional funding that was announced in the ACT budget is going to any type of quality assurance process. There are a number of issues. We have tenants contacting us who have repeatedly tried to raise repair issues and there has been nothing happening with them. Then we have clients where someone has attended the property and the work order has not been fully addressed or the work has not been of a sufficiently high quality. We are not talking about minor repair issues. As an example of that, we have been assisting someone who has not had continual hot water in winter over a number of years.

We try to assist people with maintenance requests. On our advice line is the solicitor who basically deals with most of those matters. He said to me the other day that he estimates that at least half of the matters that he currently assists with are in relation to trying to deal with housing repairs and maintenance issues. What we have spoken to Housing ACT about is the need for some quality assurance framework so that there is some checking of the work that has or has not been done and also some checking as to the quality of that work.

THE CHAIR: Why is it failing so badly? I get the same emails that you get.

Ms Bolton: I know. I see that you are copied in.

THE CHAIR: Yes. I do not understand. Is there a disconnect? Obviously, we will be talking to the minister again about this later this fortnight. Is there a disconnect between the program and Housing ACT, in terms of the coordination of maintenance? I do not want to put words in your mouth, Ms Bolton, but it appears that this is failing badly, does it not?

Ms Bolton: Obviously, the people who contact us are the people for whom the system has failed badly.

THE CHAIR: Yes—the ones who are happy do not call you.

Ms Bolton: We do not hear from the ones who are happy. The evidence has to be taken in that context, but—

THE CHAIR: There is a lot of evidence.

Ms Bolton: it is very concerning. For some of the people we see, the house is falling down around them—

THE CHAIR: I visit them.

Ms Bolton: They are desperate to move. The growing and renewing program is a whole other issue, but in some cases they have made representations that they want to be considered under the growing and renewing program. Sometimes that has been successful and sometimes it has not been. But it seems that there is a disconnect between the two systems. Often housing managers will say that they do not see it as part of their role, but they will say to Housing ACT tenants, “You need to follow this up with Maintenance. You need to follow this up with the program yourself.”

THE CHAIR: Ms Clay, I am sorry for barging in. Mr Pettersson.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you. I just want to clarify: there is a grant from the commonwealth government that is expiring and that is why you are seeking this additional funding from the ACT government.

Ms Bolton: We had the benefit of additional funding through the National Legal Assistance Partnership. That is right.

MR PETTERSSON: May I ask how conversations at the federal level have gone in advancing—

Ms Bolton: The commonwealth government’s position at the moment is: “There is a review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership currently underway, so let us wait and see what that produces and what that review tells us about the level of unmet legal need within not only the ACT but within Australia.” What I think will apply to us, but I will need to seek confirmation, is another welcome measure in the ACT government budget: indexation to the community sector, which was 5.5 per cent or something. At the moment, under the commonwealth government funding arrangement, there is very little indexation. You are going backwards on your day-to-day core funding. You are going backwards anyway.

MR PETTERSSON: Do you know what the time line is for that review to be completed?

Ms Bolton: Early next year. I think the report—

MR CAIN: Chair, a supplementary on that: when—

THE CHAIR: I do not know that Mr Pettersson is done.

MR PETTERSSON: Go for it.

MR CAIN: A supplementary on Mr Pettersson's question: obviously, from your point of view, it would be preferable, while a review is happening, for the funding that you were relying upon to continue?

Ms Bolton: It was a bit complicated. The funding was available for the previous financial year. It happened. It was not just an ACT issue; it was actually a national issue. Because there were delays in getting the funding out to the states and territories and then delays in the whole negotiation process, it meant that we received two lots of funding in one financial year. We had some additional capacity that enabled us to employ additional people in the last financial year. It was of great assistance because we needed those additional people to manage the workload. The workload does not go away. There was the abolition of the 26-week notice and the additional grounds that social housing providers will now have for termination. It is still very early days, so it is very unclear how that is going to play out, as the previous speaker said, in terms of how much tribunal work might be generated through those changes as well.

MR CAIN: Finally on that point, your preference would have been for funding to be extended from the federal government while a review was going on.

Ms Bolton: We did not ask for it to be extended because it was one-off funding. It was received together instead of across three years. But the reality is that the funding is to actually help Canberra people. The funding was directed to helping ACT residents with ACT legal issues, and predominantly public and social housing issues.

MR CAIN: I have a substantive. As you mentioned in your submission, you have called, since 2021, for a specialist disability legal service. Can you give us an overview of why you felt that was needed and how the ACT government has responded to such requests?

Ms Bolton: I understand that it was proposed within the broader context of the great work that is being done by many organisations led by the ACT government under the Disability Justice Strategy. Particularly for people with disability who have high and complex needs and face particular barriers to accessing legal assistance and support, our view is that having a specialist service—because the other thing is that people with disability, based on our experience but also supported by legal research, often face multiple legal issues. Our view is that being able to have a one-stop shop with lawyers who have particular training and particular expertise in dealing with people with disability and where most of their legal issues can be addressed by one service is going to increase access to legal assistance and also increase the prospect of a successful outcome to the legal matter.

In the ACT, we have evidence of how these specialist modes of service delivery work. Street Law is a really good example of how that has worked over many years. The other example Canberra Community Law has is that, through ACT government funding, we were able to establish the Dhurrawang Aboriginal Human Rights Program, which provides ongoing intensive legal services to First Nations people in specialist areas of law. Prior to us having that service, we would go to meetings, we would go to groups, and we would know that Aboriginal people face significant legal issues in the areas of law we practiced in, and yet we were not seeing the same levels

of need—people who were contacting us. Having the Dhurrawang Aboriginal Humans Rights Program within the centre has significantly increased the number of First Nations people we are assisting. These specialist legal services do work. People with disability would be one of the most disadvantaged groups in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Ms Bolton, why do you believe, as stated earlier, that the recent changes to residential tenancies law will lead to a greater demand for your services?

Ms Bolton: It is not clear. It could, particularly in the early days. The new grounds upon which social housing providers may look to terminate tenancies are very broad. In some cases, it is subject to a just and proportionate test, which is something that we really fought for. We are pleased to see that test there, but it just depends on how housing providers choose or do not choose to use these additional grounds. When those grounds are initially tested, there is going to be all sorts of legal argument about how it should be interpreted and so forth. There is also a new behavioural ground, whereby any landlord can terminate a tenancy on the basis of behavioural ground, which again is quite broad in scope. I have some concerns that it will result in some additional work, but it is too early to tell. I should make it clear too that, at the moment, we are not seeing any additional work arising as a result of those changes.

THE CHAIR: You referred additionally to the level of crisis housing in the ACT. Given the magnitude of the housing crisis, why do you think that the level of crisis housing has remained static? It is difficult to explain, really, is it not? Are you able to offer a thought on that?

Ms Bolton: It is a funding issue, and also it is because of the blockages in the public housing system. People are waiting for much longer periods of time, but they cannot escape. There is no quick route out of crisis housing into something else. The other issue is a decrease in affordable housing, definitely since COVID. I do not have the data on this, but, anecdotally, we are seeing fewer people who are living in low-cost accommodation than we have previously.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for coming. I am pleased that you are here. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank Ms Bolton for her attendance. I do not think we took anything on notice.

Ms Bolton: No.

Short suspension.

EVANS, MRS DONNA, Executive Director, SupportLink
THOMPSON, MS MELANIE, Referral Coordinator, SupportLink

THE CHAIR: We are moving to session number 7, with Mrs Donna Evans and Ms Melanie Thompson of SupportLink. The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. When taking questions on notice, it is really handy if you can emphatically say, “I will take that question on notice.” It helps the secretary and everyone generally. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could the witnesses confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it.

Mrs Evans: Yes, I have read and understand the privilege statement.

Ms Thompson: I understand and agree.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Mrs Evans and Ms Thompson, would you like to start with an opening statement, before we proceed to questions?

Mrs Evans: No, we do not want to start with an opening statement. We just want to go straight into questions, if that is okay?

THE CHAIR: Okay. Can I ask, straight off the bat: if you were making recommendations to the government on how things could have been different in this budget, as pertaining to SupportLink, what recommendations would you make?

Mrs Evans: Firstly, we appreciate the opportunity to come and talk with you today. We have been managing the referral pathways for ACT Policing for 25 years. Our role is to figure out what it is that police need for the people they come in contact with and the services that need to be provided and offered to people, following that engagement.

On our system we have a whole range of options available for police, such as family violence, drug and alcohol diversion, restorative justice, parenting and relationship counselling. We work very hard with police to make sure that there are not any gaps when they are out in the community and needing to get people in contact with all the services that are funded to deliver support. The biggest gap we have had the whole time we have been operating in this space is trauma support. It came up in the dangerous driving inquiry, in terms of the immediate response that people need when there has been a trauma. We are talking specifically about motor vehicle fatalities or motor vehicle critical or life-changing incidents.

We delivered a trauma support service because, while working with police, they said to us, “This is what we need. It is great that we can put referrals in for you to make contact with people, following a critical or significant incident, but we need someone to come out here when we have major events happening. When we have a busload of people; when there has been family killed on the road; when we have people lined up for four, five or six hours; when we have motor vehicle collisions and we have a lot of witnesses and we are going to be here for a very long time, we need a service to come

out and help navigate that for families.”

We started to implement a service where we went to all sudden and unexpected deaths in the ACT. We self-funded for 10 years, while trying to advocate for the service, and in that time we saw a huge range of positive outcomes for people. We engaged with them right at the time of the critical incident. We looked at what they needed right then and there. We provided the support for the emergency service providers to continue doing what they were doing in that space so that they did not have to navigate the needs of family members, witnesses, first-aid providers and anybody else who was attending. We then stayed with people through the journey of navigating funeral arrangements, identifications, viewings and eventually counselling, if that was where they needed to go. We talked to the workplace, talked to schools, and helped people advocate for time off work and for allowances with study.

Anything that somebody needed is what we did. Since we stopped delivering that service, we keep hearing from police and from people who are affected that these are the gaps that they are feeling when they have been through something like that. They just do not have that service. We are now on the receiving end of referrals that come from major incidents such as sudden death, motor vehicle fatalities or long-term critical incidents.

We acknowledge that the government has put money into this space, with the Coronial Counselling Service and with more money going into the Coroner’s Court, but there are still so many gaps for people who do not fit into those spaces. If it has not been a death but it has been a life-changing event, the services do not cover the people who fall outside of that. If they are a person who has attended and done first aid, we do not check up on them. We do not look at the longer impact for people who do not necessarily need a counselling service or an immediate type of response. We do not provide a practical: “How can we help you? What do you need?”

The services that we have got have criteria around them that many of our clients fall outside. One of them that keeps coming back, if we are talking about a road fatality, is that we often have accidents over the border. The situation we have here in the ACT is that if you lose your child or your partner in New South Wales, you are not eligible for services in the ACT or New South Wales because you live in the ACT and somebody has died in Jerrabomberra. There are gaps which, when we stick to the criteria, exclude many people from our services.

If we could provide any sort of support, it would be to say: “Look at what somebody is going through.” We should look at what they need and try to provide whatever support we can, rather than locking us into coronial processes that might be available to next of kin. Next of kin can be a very grey area in terms of who accesses support. Counselling is not necessarily what someone needs. They need some more practical things before they head into that space.

THE CHAIR: When you spoke of that trauma support program and you suggested that you self-funded for 10 years, what did you mean? What does that look like?

Mrs Evans: We received funding for the ACT Ambulance Service. We provided a 24/7 wellbeing service for paramedics. We provided the standby suicide response

service. We had funding for both of those programs. Having staff available 24/7 and having our staff trained to be trauma-informed responsive—not counsellors, but we looked at the wellbeing and first-aid response required—we were able to provide that kind of support. We did get two allocations of funding, twice. But once the Coronial Counselling Service was funded there was no additional funding for trauma support.

MS CLAY: You are doing amazing work. I am also astounded at this 10 years of self-funding for a really valuable service. Thank you. When you talk about sending out a trauma support person, do you mean sending out a trained counsellor to an accident scene? Is that what that looks like?

Mrs Evans: We have an agreement in place with ACT Policing, because it is a crime scene when somebody dies unexpectedly. We were able to get an agreement in place that we would become part of the police response. We would turn up at the same time. We would do a death message or we would be there at the time that somebody was required to be there. That person might be there for four, five, six hours—probably longer if it is a homicide. It could be multiple locations. We would stay with people during that time, particularly people who we could make a referral for later on. For example, we might come across people like a 15-year-old who is doing CPR on their mother or their father or—

Ms Thompson: Or you might have a grandparent who needs to pick the grandkids up from after school care and they need some language on how to tell them that their mother is not coming home. That cannot wait for weeks down the track, when the therapeutic intervention starts. They need support and information then and there.

Mrs Evans: They need to know what is happening. Even though police do an amazing job at telling people what is happening, people in the middle of trauma cannot retain information. They need someone to answer the questions that they have, when they come up, and to be with them through that journey of: “What’s happening next and what do I need to do?” We saw that, when we started to then accept referrals and find services, it is very hard for agencies to get in contact with people because, once that trauma escalates and the busyness comes, people do not answer their phones. They are not willing to engage. It is very hard to connect with people once they hit that higher level of trauma, but if you are in there and you have got that contact and that connection, it is often seamless to move forward and provide ongoing support.

MS CLAY: Yes, it is. I have been at a few scenes, unfortunately. It is quite a different role to have somebody there supporting the individuals who are experiencing those events, as opposed to someone whose job it is, for instance, to investigate the events.

Mrs Evans: Very much.

MS CLAY: The police do a marvellous job, but their job is to investigate the events. They are not there primarily to support the people who have experienced them. I imagine, too, that providing that support—as well as just being a human thing to do for somebody going through an awful experience and assisting them to inform the greater network of friends and family—probably also has long-term health benefits in reducing PTSD and reducing long-term conditions.

Mrs Evans: Absolutely: mental health, the use of drugs and alcohol, and returning to work.

MS CLAY: Yes.

Mrs Evans: Absolutely. The list is endless.

MS CLAY: It might be a cold-hearted way to look at it, but the investment of providing good emotional and psychological support at the time is probably well worth it.

Mrs Evans: There is so much research. There is even research into the fact that it is useful if I tell somebody's child what has happened, rather than if the mother does, in terms of their ongoing concept of that conversation.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

MR PETERSSON: We are here to scrutinise the 2023-24 ACT budget. I was hoping you could be specific on what funding you would like to see for your organisation.

Mrs Evans: We have got some funding there that is going to help people after the event. What we are seeking is a 24/7 response, too. We would include all sudden deaths, for which there are very minimal support networks available, for which there are not people around to provide that support; there is no family. We are seeking, where it is required, a 24/7 response as part of emergency services attending a sudden death or a major event.

Ms Thompson: And support that does not have strict criteria. If we know there have been some changes to funding to existing services, that will be really valuable to people who fit that criteria. But suppose that there was not a death. Suppose I have just got my P plates. I am driving, I am following the speed limit and all of a sudden someone comes up really aggressively behind me and I end up involved in a five-minute long—feels like a lifetime—road rage incident.

That person is never found. There is no-one charged. There was no physical injury to me or my vehicle, but that is going to impact you. It is going to have a significant impact on you. When we speak with people who have been through these incidents, they are dealing with not only the trauma of what happened but the trauma of what could have happened. Suppose I also have my sister in the car because I was taking her to a ballet class. The whole time I am thinking, “What if it had turned out a completely different way?”

Getting support at that point and having what you need right now is important. It might just be a one-off conversation, to say, “The fact that you're not sleeping and you can't concentrate at school—those things are really common reactions to trauma. Things may reduce on their own, but let's get you some support in place, in case they don't.”

MR PETERSSON: You seem to have an idea of what it is you want to see

implemented. Do you have rough costings for what this would look like?

Mrs Evans: We do; we have done those for other projects. We could provide that on notice, if you would like to have a look at that.

MR PETTERSSON: That would be helpful. Thank you.

Mrs Evans: The other thing I want to add quickly is that, where there is funding for services in this space, we would really like open criteria to be applied. What we find very frustrating, wearing our police referral services hat, is when we have somebody who is not eligible for a service who really needs the service. The support could be provided, but they do not meet the criteria. Motor vehicle accidents have been our biggest ones. We have not been able to provide any support for anybody, up until some recent funding that we are aware of that will go through for that. It is about being open to that humanity of caring for people, rather than saying, “Sorry; it doesn’t meet the legislation or requirements,” because they sit outside the parameters of location or similar.

Ms Thompson: It is also about making sure that the services are able to meet the demand, and not having closed doors. We should have no closed doors. When you are told a service is at capacity, despite the fact that you have lost someone very close to you, while you can step back and think, “Well, they’re at capacity,” for that person it makes them feel: “My loss wasn’t significant enough to get support.”

Mrs Evans: Agencies decline referrals, close their books, put people on a waiting list or just don’t take any more, and that is really unacceptable when this is a life-changing event for somebody. We have the opportunity to check in and provide some sort of level of support. We should do the most that we can.

MR CAIN: You made reference to some of the recommendations from the dangerous driving inquiry, which is recommending that the government institute trauma training, have trauma services available at the scene of an accident. You are probably aware that I am the chair of the committee that issued that report. More recently, on Friday, the committee issued a recommendation for a through-care management program at Bimberi. We have also had commentary about the role of the Victims of Crime Commissioner in supporting complainants in a court case. From the scene of an accident, for example, what extent of a through-care program do you see SupportLink being able to provide the court?

Mrs Evans: We are putting a lot of funding—and we need to—into contacting people and providing those “down the track” kinds of services. What we do not have is that immediate response: “What do you need now?” We are making people fit into whatever program a service delivers or whatever is being offered. We need that initial approach of: “How can I help you? What do you need?” We need to have the flexibility to say, “It’s all of these things that we need to do before we can even think about what’s happened.” All of these practical and emotional needs have to be met before we go into the therapeutic or more structured service delivery.

Ms Thompson: The eligibility criteria of particular services mean that we need to have more information before we know whether they are eligible or not. If someone is

in hospital, on life support, but they are still alive, a person cannot access services for a sudden death because their loved one is still alive. If it is not clear who was at fault or whether there was a crime committed, they are not able to access services, specific support for people impacted by crime. Sometimes circumstances alone mean that a person is going to be sitting in limbo, not knowing where they can access support.

MR CAIN: So you see a greater role for SupportLink. If that is the case, what is needed from the ACT government to bring that about?

Mrs Evans: I do, and mostly because we have seen for 10 years how the program has worked so well. We have some very strong advocates for that model within ACT Policing, and it would be easy to get some anecdotal or even some concrete information about what the benefit was.

MR CAIN: What more would you need from the ACT government to be there for that service?

Mrs Evans: It is really just about funding.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: What percentage of your services are delivered to actual frontline workers: to police officers and to ambulance officers? We are speaking about members of the public who are facing trauma and facing situations that they did not think they would face on that day, that are quite extreme. I am trying to get a handle on what percentage of your services is delivered to police officers and ambulance officers?

Mrs Evans: We are not funded anymore to deliver the wellbeing service for ACTAS. That has gone through a whole-of-ESA approach. We did that for 10 years. While we were there, we were able to deliver a lot of on-the-ground support to the emergency services that had arrived. We would get comments like, "I'm so glad you're here. Thank you for being here. It is all happening in there; off you go." It was very much around: "I would not have thought to use that language," or "I would not have necessarily said it that way. It was really helpful to have that perspective."

It means that they can get on with the job they are doing. They are not trained to have the right kind of language and are fearful of saying the wrong thing, so they are more reluctant to engage. There is also an element of people who do not necessarily want to engage with police, so you can be the intermediary at the time. You provide an opportunity for police to step back and do their job. You role model the kinds of trauma-informed responses that you can provide at the time of a critical incident and then leave them with the opportunity to come back to you later.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for being a part of estimates day one.

Mrs Evans: Thank you for having us.

THE CHAIR: It has been a pleasure to have the pair of you. If you have taken any questions on notice, could you please provide answers to the committee secretary

within five working days of receiving the uncorrected proof transcript. Thank you.

Mrs Evans: A pleasure. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We will suspend for a short moment while we wait for the next witnesses.

Short suspension.

BOURDET, MS MICHELLE, Secretary, Weston Creek Community Council
GEMMELL, MR BILL, Chair, Weston Creek Community Council
BUTLER, MR LACHLAN, Chair, Belconnen Community Council

THE CHAIR: We will now speak with representatives of the Weston Creek Community Council and the Belconnen Community Council. The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today will also be transcribed and published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be extremely useful if witnesses could emphatically say, “I will take that question on notice.” This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm later. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms Bourdet: I do.

Mr Gemmell: I do.

Mr Butler: I also have read and acknowledge it.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Would representatives from the Weston Creek Community Council like to start with an opening statement, followed by Mr Butler from the Belconnen Community Council, before we proceed to questions.

Mr Gemmell: We would. Thank you. There are a few quick points I would like to put on the record and then I will hand over to Mr Butler. Thanks for inviting us. We think this is an important inquiry. Assembly inquiries provide a layer of scrutiny that is essential. We provided a formal submission to the budget process. I believe you have a copy of it. We did note that there was substantial proposed infrastructure investment: \$1.6 billion in 2023-24 and \$8 billion over the outyears.

We note the significant additional funding for ACT Policing. We do have some concerns about whether the commitment will be met. This is from experience and the way the labour market is operating. We just do not know. It is all well and good to put a number out there; let’s see if it can be delivered. We would appreciate the committee perhaps inquiring a bit further into that aspect.

We have some long-held concerns that the government has not been investing to enhance the safety, wellbeing and quality lifestyle of Weston Creek residents. Stuff is often left shabby. With things like potholes you might say, “This pothole has not been done.” If you say to a 90-year-old that a pothole has not been repaired, they say, “I can’t go out.” That is significant. They feel like they are trapped.

We have a longstanding perception that there is a delivery gap. Essential services are lagging behind development and basic upkeep is often neglected. Upgrade projects are frequently delayed and we often struggle to figure out what the reasons are. There are a number of private shopping centre upgrades. That might sound like nothing, but it makes people feel better; it makes people feel safer. Often what is started, what is proposed to start, is not actually fully delivered. There is a gap.

It is also very difficult to follow the money trail for capital improvement projects. I struggle to read the budget papers, and I have read Commonwealth budget papers for many years. These ones I really struggle with. I notice that is talked about on page 36, so perhaps it could be a little bit more transparent. That is it from me.

Mr Butler: Thank you. I echo a lot of the things that Bill has said, so I will not take up too much time. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be here and for letting us engage in the budget process.

A couple of things I want to cover are that Belconnen is the largest district and the most populous district. That is true now and it is going to be true in 40 years time. I think it is a beautiful district. I think it is the best district. I hope the majority of the MLAs here agree on that one. We have a lot of population growth predicted and we think it is really important that the infrastructure, the services and the amenities keep up with that. We think it is very important that we at least maintain our standard of living; ideally, we will improve the standard of living.

We called for a few things in the budget. We asked for action on a new north-side hospital. We have got that. We also asked for additional funding for public housing, schools, policing and improving the pathways around Lake Ginninderra. I definitely agree that the ACT budget papers are much more difficult than the Commonwealth papers to review. I read the Commonwealth ones for work and they are much, much easier to read than the ACT budget papers. I am happy to conclude there. I welcome any questions.

THE CHAIR: I am going to start with Mr Gemmell. One of the things that I got from your opening statement is that you have been watching this space for a long, long time. You cast a somewhat expert eye over what has been going on because you have been observing the space for a long time. What I hear from you is that you like the sound of what is pitched in a number of areas in the budget, but you do not believe that it is actually going to be delivered or that it is going to be delivered in a reasonable time frame.

Mr Gemmell: Sceptical is probably the best way to sum it up, and that is from experience. Projects run over; they are not quite delivered correctly. You promise the stallion but you end up with a zebra. That is my comparison. Yes, I watch it. What I was getting at with that funding—and I do not want to dwell on it too much because there are wiser people than me around—is that it is very hard to figure out where the money went. It is very hard to figure out. It might well be there, but try getting a straight answer. The bureaucrats, the officials, also struggle to answer those questions. I bail them up at our public meetings occasionally and say—

THE CHAIR: I know.

Mr Gemmell: where did the money go?

THE CHAIR: Did you have any reflection on that, Mr Butler?

Mr Butler: I think scepticism is a pretty fair way to put it. There are some great ideas put out there, there are some great policies out there, but take light rail stage 3, for

example. There is theoretically great potential for that to link up with the new north-side hospital, with a new stadium, to connect the Belconnen town centre, to link up with Kippax, but we still have not got stage 2 locked in. How can we start planning for a new north-side hospital that has that accessibility or a new stadium that has great accessibility through a light rail system if none of these conversations or planning has occurred now?

MS CLAY: I would love to dig into transport. You made a lot of recommendations in your community council drafted submission on transport about planning more quickly for light rail stage 3; about more bus numbers, more bus drivers and making public transport more of a priority; about the increasing services for west Belconnen for rapid routes, given the changes we have had in the recent timetables and how poorly serviced that area is; and also about our cycling and footpaths, which is a comment echoed by Mr Gemmell.

Do you see funding in this budget sufficient to address all of those concerns? I have seen funding in there for some of the active travel, and I do not know if it is sufficient, but it is more, which is great. I have not seen funding in there for light rail stage 3, for west Belconnen buses, for more buses or for a north-side bus depot that would enable all that to happen. Did you?

Mr Butler: No, I did not see a lot of what we asked for addressed in this budget.

MS CLAY: Interesting. Realistically, how do you think public transport is going to improve in the next couple of years if we have not funded it?

Mr Butler: That is a great question. I do not see this budget going far enough to address any of the transport issues in Belconnen, and especially west Belconnen. West Belconnen is going to have tens of thousands of people moving there over the next couple of decades. Realistically, nothing has occurred to improve public transport or transport in that area. When it comes to investing in efficient bus networks or anything like that, it would be great if the infrastructure that we invest in now could work with the light rail infrastructure that is put in. You need to have choice. You need to have an integrated public transport network, and that really has not come through in this budget.

MS CLAY: I was interested in your opening statement—the comment about the footpaths. On our assessment of the budget, we have gone from about \$5 million in maintenance funding to about \$12 million in maintenance funding for footpaths and shared paths, which is great. It is the first time that funding has changed for a number of years, so I think that is good. We get the same comments from people using the footpaths: that some of them are trapped if they do not have confidence that they can use them.

Mr Gemmell: Definitely. We sometimes have to be a bit realistic in the budget expectation as well. There are workforce constraints and there are material constraints. We have been slammed through COVID, and we are looking at almost a workforce crisis at the moment. We do not have enough workers to do the task, so I would hope that the funding has been calculated based on the available workforce that can be accessed.

This is also the problem, getting back to transport. We are now up to capacity constraints with building light rail, designing light rail. Even as the whole country electrifies, we lost the first mover advantage on electric buses by delaying. We have not put in the high voltage infrastructure. That is only going in now. The Woden bus depot is only really underway now. This is stuff that maybe should have been done three or four years ago. All our aspirations have to be tempered a bit by the knowledge and the reality that there are constraints in the economy. Otherwise, we probably would have gone a bit stronger on it in our submission.

MS CLAY: There might be a good reason for prioritisation, though. We had that question with the MBA this morning about prioritisation in an environment with constrained labour and constrained supplies: how do you choose?

Mr Gemmell: It is not covered in our submission, but there have to be some productivity improvements out there, and I am not seeing evidence of that. People are coming in and asking for more money, but can they use it better? I do not know. Can they? It is a question I ask when I hear: “We will just do what we did previously, and we will keep on doing it. Just give us money to do more of it.” I do not know that that is good enough.

Ms Bourdet: Can I add two points about the footpaths. There are two important things, I think. It is probably Canberra-wide, but specifically for Weston Creek there are a lot of areas that do not have footpaths at all, so you are forced to walk on the road, or they are badly maintained. There are also a lot of underpasses. In the women’s health survey, six hotspots in Weston Creek alone are deemed unsafe. That ties in with the footpath issue, because you are forced into underpasses that are not lit. One that I know of floods, so you walk through a flood to get there. It is a safety issue, as well as a maintenance issue. I would like that noted.

MS CLAY: It is also a perceived safety issue. Women often will not use it if they do not feel safe.

Ms Bourdet: That ties in, then, to public transport usage. Women will not use public transport of an evening or on their own because, to get there, they have to travel through unsafe areas.

MR PETTERSSON: I am not from either neck of the woods. I am going through your submissions and what I have seen you put out about the budget, and I am trying to get a greater sense of what are the priorities. I can see a very long list of projects that you think are worthy of consideration. For things that have not been funded yet, what are your top three, where you think: “The government needs to move on this, and now”?

Mr Gemmell: It almost changes by day. Policing? Yes; definitely. The community keeps on telling us that. Whenever I do a survey—we do one occasionally—or when we are having a meeting, people are always talking about police response times and not enough of them. If the police come and address a meeting, they say, “There are only so many of us, and usually we are at Hume.” You might have heard that line. They are at Hume; they are at Fyshwick. Then they have got to go over to Duffy or

Rivett. It is an awfully long way. They have got to do their job over there, then travel 15, 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, somebody is traumatised, and they are waiting. Trauma can be a perception that they are not feeling safe; they have been threatened. We need to give people that confidence. Sometimes we are talking about quite old people, vulnerable people. They are genuinely frightened. The issues are policing, safety on the paths and better lighting in underpasses. Those sorts of things—and just the general trip hazards. There are trip hazards all over the place. I have taken a few big tumbles myself on my walk over to the bus stop.

Ms Bourdet: True story.

Mr Gemmell: Yes. Anything you want to add?

Ms Bourdet: I think one of the issues is that the list is long because there is a perception that the budget promises are recycled. The list gets longer because things are not finished. We call that a delivery gap. There are also things that get promised. For instance, in the budget and in the district strategy for Weston Creek, Brierly Street has been promised since about 2014. The list gets longer because things are not completed properly. I think things need to be done in a timely fashion. Also, by the time they happen, the price has gone up, so of course it gets more expensive because it is not done quickly. That is a really big problem, so you end up with a maintenance cycle. We have said in our submission that we think there needs to be an audit and a proper plan, because it seems to be reactionary and ad hoc, and that is why the list gets longer.

THE CHAIR: Mr Butler, did you want to also respond?

Mr Butler: Yes. For us, it is a difficult question to answer because our district has suburbs that are 50 years old, some that are 30 years old and some that are five years old, so if I talk to someone in Strathnairn, they are going to say something completely different to someone in one of those much older suburbs. In the older suburbs you have footpath and road maintenance not being kept up as much as it needs to be, especially in some of these ageing communities. Trip hazards—I have heard that from a vast variety of people in those older suburbs.

Across the district, some of the things that would be mentioned would be north Canberra hospital services. You need to be able to go to a hospital and get the services that you need and the quality of service that you need. We have had people come to us and say that they have been transferred to Canberra Hospital and back two or three times, or sent home because it is busy, or they are there for hours. So even though there is going to be a new north-side hospital, the current hospital still needs to be up to scratch, delivering what people expect.

When it comes to transportation, there is funding in the budget for William Hovell Drive, but people want to see that move a bit quicker. They have been hearing about it for a long time and they want to see a bit more action or have a bit more knowledge on how that project will progress.

When it comes to public transport, one of the things that we had in our submission was more bus lanes going to west Belconnen. I catch the bus to work each day and it takes 55 to 60 minutes when I come in at 8 am. On the way home the bus does not really stick to the timetable and takes a bit longer. I do not mind the trip in. I can accept that they are a bit tired in the morning. I can relax then, but the afternoon trip is a bit rough. How we move around our suburbs, how we move around our district and how we move into the rest of Canberra is a bit of a priority.

THE CHAIR: Mr Gemmell, when responding to Mr Pettersson's question, your instant go-to was policing. A member of the government has suggested that if we had more police, we would just have more crime. Would you or community members of Weston Creek subscribe to that view, do you think, Mr Gemmell?

Mr Gemmell: There is a body of research out there. I have not got any at my fingertips at the moment. If you create a perception that you are serious about enforcing the law, you might find stuff that is not being reported at the moment. That is the first thing. Secondly, you create community confidence that it will be addressed. I personally know of people who say, "I am not bothering to report that minor crime because they will not do anything about it."

MR CAIN: I want to go to municipal services: the quality of our roads and footpaths, and the maintenance of our parks and shopping centres. Firstly, thank you for the role of the community councils. I think they play an incredibly important role in being a voice for the districts. Have you got an assessment of those basic municipal services and the quality of them? Have they been static; have they declined or improved? Do you see any hope in this current budget to remedy any of these defects?

Mr Butler: You are more than welcome to go first.

Mr Gemmell: I think the funding will merely keep abreast of the situation. It is not going to advance things, but it should address the decline. It is a tough—

MR CAIN: That is if it is spent, of course.

Mr Gemmell: Yes, if it can be spent. There is some good stuff. There are pockets of good stuff going on. I do not want to be totally negative here. Take tree planting. There are a lot of nice trees going in, but then you look at the maintenance of some of those trees and say, "Hello! They are not going to live." It is piecemeal at best. We would love to see a more coherent plan for how they are doing this stuff. There is a favourite bit of path that I walk on that rocks when I walk on it. It rocks because they drove a truck on it to repair the other bit, at the other end. Those are the sorts of things that come to mind.

Mr Butler: I will address the shops aspect of it. We have seen some good stuff starting to happen at Charnwood and Kippax. Giralang shops are starting to move in the right direction. There is some good action there. One of the concerns that we have is: how do you stop shops declining in the future? It is great to put some money into Charnwood and Kippax. We have got an anchor tenant at Giralang, so hopefully that project will get off the ground. But there is nothing really happening at the moment that is going to guarantee more certainty for these local and group centres in five or

10 years time.

When it comes to mowing, there is, from my understanding, a little bit more money in the budget for mowing and some road repair and footpath repair. The past couple of years have been pretty tough when it comes to road repair and mowing, with the weather that we have had, but that is the thing that people see. It is at the forefront of so many people's minds.

MR CAIN: Are there any parts of each of your districts that you think need a little bit more love and support in basic area services?

Mr Butler: In those ageing suburbs I think you will find that people are very passionate about very specific paths. One that is raised with us a lot is the Lake Ginninderra path. That is the one where people come and say, "I tripped over that last week," or "A month ago I tripped over that." Everyone I have spoken to knows someone who has tripped over or they themselves have tripped. There is some money in there to improve it, but I think people want to see more around that beautiful lake.

Ms Bourdet: For us, the talk when you go down to the shops is that the whole area is neglected. They feel like they have been forgotten and ignored—and have been for a long time. We are the smallest district but we punch above our weight. We think it deserves a bit more.

MR CAIN: There are two of you here. Look at that.

Ms Bourdet: We have asked for an upgrade of Fisher shops for years. Duffy shops, when the YourSay survey came out, had, at the time, the highest response. It is a great playground, but they did not do Duffy shops. They just did the playground. With sporting facilities, particularly for females, good luck getting changed in Weston Creek. The Rivett change rooms were upgraded, but they are not good enough. They have not been done since the seventies; that is my understanding. I could be wrong on that, but it is a long time. Generally, any of the local shops and sporting facilities are really high needs areas.

MR CAIN: I look forward to your input on where you see this money being spent, if it does get spent. Thank you.

MS CLAY: I am interested in schools planning. I have not seen a school planned for Belconnen town centre and I have not seen a school planned in the district plan. Do you see that as a need, with 10,000 people living there?

Mr Butler: I definitely see it as a need, and the planning should happen now. A common theme throughout our submission is that population growth is occurring. There are people moving in, but the infrastructure just is not keeping up. A Belconnen town centre primary school has been raised with us by a number of people. The other school that we called out for was Strathnairn primary school. That has been delayed. There has been, from my understanding, more money put in the budget to cater for increased costs with that one. On the west Belconnen side, people want to see that school happening. There does not appear to be a lot of action, even though there is money in the budget. We have been calling for one for Belconnen town centre. We

made a submission on the district strategies being a bit lacking when it comes to planning out our districts, moving forward. The short answer to that question is: yes, we do see it as a need.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

MR CAIN: For each of you, briefly, what does the council do with the grant funding that is provided to it?

Mr Gemmell: What a great question. We get around \$12,800, I think it is, through a deed of grant arrangement. We have to acquit at the end of the year. It requires us to maintain contact with the community, currently through formal meetings that are expected to be in the same place and at the same time. We are down to nine times a year now—you take out Easter, you take out Anzac Day and you take out Christmas and January, but it keeps our schedule pretty full.

We do other targeted engagement, to provide information to our elected members. We do have some engagement with the federal members as well. We go outside the scope a bit if something topical happens. We are currently doing a bit with the NBN transition. They are leaving open pits in neighbourhoods—just open pits—so we are doing a bit on that. There are other bits and pieces. We get all sorts of weird inquiries on our telephone line, and we are often a referral service. “Can I get married in Fetherston Gardens?” was one the other day. We had to send them to the right place.

Ms Bourdet: The bulk of the money goes on room hire, hall hire, and insurance is a really big one. It is dependent on us applying for other grants to do the big projects. For a group of volunteers, those grants are very time-consuming. For instance, the garden party we did at Fetherston Gardens was additional. We had to apply for a grant to get that. Insurance is a really big cost. The other thing is the expectation that there will be online availability. We have spent a lot of money on technology. That is valuable because the hall-style public meeting is a bit dated and online gives greater access to a wider range of people. But setting that up has come at a cost.

Mr Butler: I echo that. We have very similar things. We get the \$12,800 per year. A good \$1,500 to \$2,000 of that goes straight to storage costs.

Ms Bourdet: I forgot about storage.

Mr Butler: We use the money for insurance. Paying for a phone takes up a couple of hundred bucks a year. Zoom, to have the premium version of it, takes up money. Very quickly a lot of that grant is swallowed up by the bare minimum needed to function. Recently we have ordered a bunch of flyers. We are letterboxing a number of suburbs in Belconnen to promote a survey and to promote us a bit more. There are only so many times that you can spend that sort of money when you have only got \$12,800.

MR CAIN: Thank you. You do a lot with a little, and perhaps that is something that government should be listening to.

THE CHAIR: Michelle, Bill and Lachlan, thank you.

Mr Butler: Thank you.

Ms Bourdet: Thank you.

Mr Gemmell: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for coming. I am sure you did not take anything on notice, so that is good.

MS CLAY: We are dealing with experts.

THE CHAIR: We will now draw this session to a close. We will be back at 1 pm.

Hearing suspended from 12.01 to 1 pm.

LEWIS, MS JANINE, Vice President (Village Liaison), ACT Retirement Villages Residents Association
CAINE, MS ANNE, Secretary, ACT Retirement Villages Residents Association

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings of the Select Committee on Estimates 2023-2024. In the first of our afternoon sessions, we will hear from the ACT Retirement Villages Residents Association. The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and they will be published on the Assembly website. If you do take a question on notice it would be useful if you emphatically say, "I will take that question on notice" because it will help the committee and witnesses to confirm later. Can I remind the witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege which I am assuming you have read. Could you confirm for the record you understand the implications of the privilege statement and you agree to it.

Ms Lewis: I agree.

Ms Caine: I agree.

THE CHAIR: Would the ACT Retirement Villages Residents Association like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Ms Lewis: Yes, we would. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. The floor is yours.

Ms Lewis: On behalf of the members of the ACT Retirement Villages Residents Association, Anne Caine and I welcome the opportunity to meet with the committee today. We would like to introduce you to our organisation by saying that our organisation's aims are to advocate for, to inform, to advise and to represent retirement village residents.

Our current membership in our association is 165 and growing. We have re-established the association with some vigour and enthusiasm and currently have a committee of 10 volunteers. Financially, we are starting though from a very small base. Much of our administration needs to be established. To that end we, together with Council on the Ageing and Care Financial Services, have approached Minister Rattenbury for \$150,000 to be equally divided among us. All three agencies will be talking to him next week about that.

Our share, the \$50,000, is sought to establish basic administration functions such as office equivalent services, a telephone inquiries line, our information and technology and website, member communications such as a regular newsletter and a project officer to assist with research and analysis. We anticipate ongoing funding will be needed in the future to operate as a viable communicative and supportive association serving the interests of this growing sector, and we anticipate working with government, with the operators, with resident committees and with individual residents themselves.

Our recent focus has been on raising awareness of our presence to retirement village

residents through a very successful forum. We are now hearing of the needs of individual residents and the demands of the sector. We hear stories of management resistance and delays in response to resident's requests and even bullying. Management personnel can be inexperienced or insensitive in dealing with seniors who have invested significantly in their village homes. In promoting our forum, we became aware that not all managers supported our efforts to inform residents about the association, which we found surprising. All of these interactions and our response to them are time-consuming, hence our request for financial support to continue this valuable work.

We are also working hard to connect with sector groups such as various state RVRAs, the property council bodies representing the village owners, and local like-minded organisations such as Vintage Reds, and Council on the Ageing. I believe that is all we need to do to introduce ourselves.

Ms Caine: I will talk about a couple of our current priorities. We will be grateful for some funding to help us pursue those priorities. There is a significant lack of hard data on the actual size, composition and operations of the ACT retirement village sector that can be used by us to assist the retirement village residents and also by others to inform the management of this growing sector, for example, by government in relation to village planning, sustainable housing policies and service delivery. Our attempts to get such information from Access Canberra met with limited success because there is no requirement for a central information repository. Basic information is just not readily available or held by government. Limited information is available from industry, but that is held for their own purposes.

This situation does not, in our view, lead to efficient government planning or policy development or effective consultation with the sector. Missing data includes: the number of villages; the number of residents; the size and infrastructure in each of the villages; the co-location of residential aged care units; services provided, including commonwealth funded aged care services in these villages; and systemic problems, for example, elder abuse in the villages. We are willing to contribute to building an accurate retirement village information base by working in partnership with government and industry to collect and maintain a comprehensive database.

The collection of this valuable data could be significantly improved, we think, by amending the Retirement Villages Act to require government registration of retirement villages with appropriate requirements for the provision of critical information such as already occurs in New South Wales and Queensland. In conclusion on this point, no-one seems to have a current or comprehensive overview or understanding of this significantly and rapidly growing sector.

The second of our priorities is that we feel there is a strong need for an ACT ombudsman or a similar agency for the retirement village sector to assist to resolve intractable disputes involving retirement village residents and often the operators. We were pleased to have the unanimous support from the Legislative Assembly for our petition recently for an ombudsman. We thank all members, as well as the government agencies presently working on this, for their support. We also endorse a National Seniors ACT budget submission that also seeks the appointment of a retirement village ombudsman.

We look forward to working with government agencies to fully address the present gaps in resident protection that arise from the power imbalance between residents and owners and management. We need an approachable ombudsman with binding decision-making and enforcement powers. All stakeholders would benefit from an effective dispute resolution mechanism in this environment. Without such a body, residents will continue to be at risk and have only ACAT from which to obtain an enforceable decision. That avenue is a protracted, adversarial and costly process and is very intimidating for most people but especially seniors. We applaud the Legislative Assembly's recent move to establish a rental ombudsman and the government's commitment to thoroughly investigating existing rental ombudsman models across Australia. Clearly there are synergies with a retirement village ombudsman.

In summary, the ACT Retirement Villages Residents Association is requesting financial assistance. We request this, firstly, to establish ourselves as an active and effective body representing residents in ACT retirement villages, which will allow us to develop effective communication with residents, management, developers and other stakeholders—for example, by setting up an inquiries and information service, like some of the other retirement village resident's associations in other jurisdictions have. Secondly, we request financial assistance to allow us to liaise with similar bodies in other jurisdictions to understand and communicate best practice in furthering our development. And we request it, thirdly, to enable us to contribute to an accurate and comprehensive database of information on the size, growth and needs of the ACT retirement village sector, and also to allow us to fully participate in the move to create a retirement village ombudsman or similar body with appropriate binding decision-making and enforcement powers: a body that is well placed and well resourced to quickly respond to all levels and complexities of unresolved resident complaints.

Thank you for your attention.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, that was wonderful. I will go to the ombudsman issue, which of course came to the Assembly through Mr Pettersson, I believe.

MR PETTERSSON: I did assist.

THE CHAIR: Given the Assembly passed that resolution, how genuinely optimistic are you that we will end up, at some stage soon, with a retirement village ombudsman? What would see you as being the next step in that process and what is your vision of how that individual is going to operate?

Ms Caine: Our current president had this idea. I am not sure where it came from, because I have only been on board for the last few months, but he had experienced some very serious problems in his village. He then took the problem to the Human Rights Commission, but nobody could agree—that is, the property owner would not agree. So we ended up taking it to ACAT, which he did not want to do, but within 48 hours of taking it to ACAT suddenly things started happening. So upon taking it into an environment where there were enforcement powers things started happening, after three years or something of not getting anything done. So we thought, “Right, we

need a body with enforcement powers.”

At the same time as he was having that problem, some other jurisdictions like Victoria were looking at an ombudsman, as were several research bodies and other bodies, like the National Seniors Association and the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. So there are a couple of people who are saying, “This is what we need for this sector.” This is going on quite frequently and so John, who is our president, came along and said that his experience with ACAT means this is something that we need.

However, since then we have also had a meeting with Karen Toohey, the Human Rights Commissioner. We said: “Look, we have these problems which we are starting to hear now that we have become an association, and some of them are quite intractable. Can you help?” She said, “Well, two things. Number one, I do not think people really understand what I can do. You know, there is an information problem. People just do not know that I exist. But secondly,”—and then John said, “Yes, but we came to you and you could not solve this.” She said, “I understand.”

So then we sort of enlisted her to try and, first of all, publicise her services or her offerings or what she does. I do not think she can overcome the problem that she does not have binding decision-making power or enforcement powers, but it is a possibility. If we do not set up a whole new ombudsman maybe—and that is why we have in our notes, “or another body”—you can enhance their powers to give us this same end result. But that is happening in an environment where several other entities are saying, “What about an ombudsman?” You yourself are saying you have a rental ombudsman, and there are similar sorts of issues there; you have people who have a power imbalance, property owners and tenants. Maybe it could be the rental and retirement village ombudsman. I do not know.

THE CHAIR: It is the first time I have heard it, but it is not such a silly idea.

MR PETTERSSON: Good idea.

MS CLAY: Thank you for those opening statements. That was really helpful. I was really interested in the idea of requiring retirement villages to register where they are so that we have better planning. We are going through this major planning review at the moment and I confess I have been through the district strategies but I have not done it with a filter of, “Where are our retirement villages and are they where we need them to be?” Do we not have that information in government?

Ms Lewis: No, we asked Access Canberra and said, “Could you give us a list of all of the retirement villages and what they look like and how many people?” And they said, “Sorry, we do not have that.”

MS CLAY: Good grief.

Ms Caine: They are very complex; you go into a retirement village and, depending on which one you go in, you get a different agreement or contract from the owner. Sometimes they are sort of leasehold or sublease from the property owner, sometimes they are licences, sometimes I do not know what they are. So this problem has come up because some of the people in villages want to set up solar panels on their units but

in order to do that there are really complex issues about who owns this unit, what is the ownership structure, who will own the solar panels and who is going to inherit them when the person passes away.

So it is a really complex issue added to the fact that, as Janine said, we have trouble with some people, some owners or managers, getting information about them. There was a recent example that I had when we were advertising a forum and this was actually the Marian. I went to them and I said, “Look, I have this brochure to advertise the forum.” The manager said, “Our residents do not want that kind of information.” “Can I just leave you the brochure then?” “Well, we will put a few copies in our common room.” So there was, like, “We do not want anybody, any of our residents to know about what you are doing.”

We thought you could get the property owners, whether now or retrospectively, to provide the information—what are the ownership structures, how many units are there, how do they operate? Also how can owners in retirement villages access the Sustainable Housing Scheme?

MS CLAY: They are a whole lot of really practical suggestions. Thank you very much. We are seeing the planning minister later this week. I have seen two of those contracts and they are devilish. I am actually guardian for somebody so I have sort of been through it. Yes, it is not straightforward and they are not the same.

Ms Caine: Well, I am actually a lawyer and when I saw this contract I went, “Oh my god, so where can I get a lawyer from?”

MS CLAY: Yes, I am from a family of lawyers and we found these contracts hard.

Ms Caine: Yes, they are impenetrable, yes.

MR PETTERSSON: Circling back to the request for funding, I was hoping you could expand on some of the costs and experiences you have had trying to get the association up and running. If you do secure this funding, what would it be used for?

Ms Lewis: We really have only been enthusiastically re-established for a few months, and so things are happening through hardworking volunteers. We have had some discussions with Council on the Ageing who said they are happy to work with us to provide facilities, for example. Also, if we were fortunate enough to get enough to employ someone part-time, that they would be happy to do all the employment action behind the scenes so that we would not have to do that sort of thing. We are talking to other RVRAs around the place who have much more money and many more people that they represent, and they are able to do a lot more with a small office. So we are working to see if we can work towards that sort of thing.

Ms Caine: I spoke to one of the vice presidents of the New South Wales Retirement Villages Residents Association and said, “How do you operate and where do you get funding from and what do you do with the funding?” They have a lot more members and they have higher membership fees so they were able to set up an office with four, five staff. But she said the critical thing they do with their staff which they employ is they have an inquiries line. So they go out and publicise, “We are the residents

association; come to us with your problems,” and residents do, of course. When you have a forum, people come with their problems. So they have an inquiries line and they have someone staffing that all the time. At the end of the month they collect all this information so they have a really good understanding of what is going on in the villages and where. I cannot remember where they said they provide that information to, but certainly to critical people like government, Fair Trading. So it is staffing an inquiries line.

They also said they produce a newsletter. I suppose that is a hardcopy newsletter like the ACT government do, which I read religiously every time it comes into my mailbox. At the moment a lot of the residents do not have computers, they do not have emails and they do not have mobile phones. So at the moment there is a need to have something in hardcopy to let people know what is going on, as well as someone to produce it and someone to distribute it. Certainly maybe in 10 or 15 years time, when the current generation is coming through, all with lots of computer skills, that may not be such an issue. But they have a newsletter four times a year, which costs a lot.

The other thing that they do with their money—and sometimes this is a one-off grant—is special projects. They recently did a survey of elder abuse in retirement villages, and they got, I think, \$50,000 to do that. The survey was very revealing and they now know that there are some serious problems and they are moving to look at that. So there are three things that they do with their funding. But as Janine said, we are really struggling with setting up basic administrative functions and just dealing with the inquiries and it would be helpful to have at least one staff member.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you, very comprehensive.

THE CHAIR: I think we are at the end of the time on that session. You ladies have done exceptionally well in projecting the position of your organisation and thank you very much for appearing in this session.

Ms Caine: Our pleasure.

THE CHAIR: Nothing was taken on notice, which is good because then you do not have to deal with that. So thanks for coming.

Ms Caine: Thanks very much for allowing us to come and talk to you.

Ms Lewis: Yes, thank you indeed.

Ms Caine: We look forward to having a healthy Retirement Villages Residents Association operating to help our ever-growing population of retirement village residents, who are also voters, of course.

THE CHAIR: They are indeed, they are indeed. We are always mindful, do not worry about that.

Short suspension.

KOLAK, MS SHANNON, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Down Syndrome Association

THE CHAIR: We welcome Ms Shannon Kolak, Chief Executive Officer of ACT Down Syndrome Association. Proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. If you take a question on notice, it would be really helpful if you can be emphatic with, “I will take that question on notice.” It will help the committee and witnesses to confirm later.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the implications in the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms Kolak: I understand, and I agree.

THE CHAIR: Ms Kolak, would you like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Ms Kolak: I will, yes. The ACT Down Syndrome Association supports people with all intellectual disability in Canberra. We want to ensure that the voice of people with intellectual disability is heard and the needs of some of our city’s most vulnerable people are met by the ACT government. We want to make sure that people with intellectual disability—their families, their carers, educators, employers and medical professionals—are properly supported to ensure that everyone in our community has access to a safe and meaningful life.

The needs of Canberrans with an intellectual disability can at times be vastly different to those members of our community who have a physical disability. It is important that the government is aware of these differences and provides funding in the budget to address the specific needs of people with intellectual disability in Canberra.

ACT Down Syndrome welcomes the government’s commitment to completing, funding and implementing the various disability strategies we have on the table at the moment. We also welcome the inclusion coach program in ACT public schools; however, we hope this program is carefully created using the knowledge of various stakeholders in the ACT and that this program will allow more young people with intellectual disability to attend their local mainstream school. We hope that through this program teachers are empowered and supported to create true inclusive classrooms, where young people with an intellectual disability can learn and thrive alongside their typical peers.

In terms of transport, the taxi subsidy program is a really big step towards increasing the independence of people with intellectual disability, but many people with intellectual disability will still find that transport is a huge barrier to their independence, meaningful employment and social connections.

We are really happy to hear that the disability inclusion position at DVCS will be funded for the next two years; however, we believe that one position is probably not enough, and we hope that there is enough funding in the budget to increase the

staffing in this area.

The mental health care of Canberrans with an intellectual disability remains a concern for us. While there is an excellent mental health clinic for people with intellectual disability in Gungahlin, we are worried about wait times and the availability of psychiatrists; however, we do understand this is a Canberra-wide issue that is being felt across our entire community, not just by the intellectual disability community. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Can I start by asking: in regard to supporting individuals with an intellectual disability, how do you think we line up with other jurisdictions? It is probably a question you were not expecting to get!

Ms Kolak: I have a little bit of knowledge in this area.

THE CHAIR: I thought you probably would.

Ms Kolak: ACT Down Syndrome is part of the Down Syndrome Australia Federation, which means I link in with CEOs from state and territory organisations all around Australia. I feel like we do okay in the ACT compared to other jurisdictions, because there are organisations like ours with a pretty loud voice, and we have really good connections with Advocacy for Inclusion, with ADACAS and with the other peak disability groups in the ACT, so I think together we do have a fairly loud voice. In terms of the other states and territories, I think they sometimes have a harder job because of the sheer size of the work that they have to complete.

THE CHAIR: That is a succinct answer—

Ms Kolak: That is my opinion, though. I have not collected statistics about this—

THE CHAIR: No, and that is all I was asking for.

Ms Kolak: As long as we have loud voices in the advocacy groups and organisations like ours, I think we do okay.

MS CLAY: Your opinions are extremely valuable and appreciated. We are very glad that you can come and share them with us. We have heard a few calls—we heard from Advocacy for Inclusion, and they are also pleased about the increase in taxi subsidy. So far today, we have had a call for a disability health strategy that is well funded; we have had a call for a specialist disability legal service on the basis that people living with a disability often have different needs and probably different access needs as well; and we have had calls for a social inclusion planning unit. The concept behind that is to make sure that, as we plan our city, our housing, our services and our transport, we have got somebody in there who is putting on a filter of, “How do we make this inclusive and friendly for lots of different people in different stages?” Have you seen similar needs for those sorts of things?

Ms Kolak: Absolutely, especially in terms of intellectual disability. When people use the term “disability”, for someone who does not come from a disability background, they often think of a person in a wheelchair or a person with Down syndrome. That is

how people externally think about disability. But when you really look at what people with disabilities need, people with intellectual disability often need things that are vastly different.

In terms of having these strategies, and in terms of having people in positions of power that can advocate for people with disability, I feel we really need to make sure that there are people also advocating for intellectual disability specifically, not just disability generally. That is how I feel about it.

MS CLAY: We also had quite a vigorous discussion with a couple of advocates about public housing, and it came up, in a number of contexts, that there is not enough, but it also came up specifically for vulnerable people and people living with a disability. Do you see a need for more public housing and for that to be more accessible?

Ms Kolak: Absolutely. People with intellectual disability often find it even harder to find suitable living arrangements—the financial is a huge thing. If you are a person with an intellectual disability—if you are not able to get a decent job, if you are not able to support yourself financially, if you cannot go to university and have the same education as someone who may not be intellectually disabled—it makes it incredibly difficult. Chances are, for a person with an intellectual disability, buying their own home—it is really hard to do that in Canberra anyway. If you are looking at a person with Down syndrome, their being able to buy their own home and pay a mortgage is almost impossible. And finding the type of safe accommodation where they can be adequately supported whilst being able to live some type of an independent life is actually really, really difficult.

THE CHAIR: It is, isn't it. It is.

Ms Kolak: Yes.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Do you have thoughts on Project Independence?

Ms Kolak: We know people who do have those units, and they live very happily in them. From what I know of the organisation, you do still need to buy into it, so it means you need to have the finances to buy into it. There are a large number of people with an intellectual disability that will never have the money to buy into something like that. I am not saying that it is not an excellent program; it is if you can afford it. But for people with intellectual disability—a lot of people, let's say with Down syndrome, might be living with their families. As their families get old and are unable to care for them, they need to have somewhere that is safe to live. They need to have somewhere where they can learn the skills they need to live independently, whilst being safe. It is a really huge challenge.

MR PETTERSSON: We have had inclusion coaches raised a couple of times today. I was hoping you could expand on what some of your concerns might be, for the committee.

Ms Kolak: We sit on the Disability Education Reference Group, so we have been

working really closely with the directorate, and one of my concerns about this is that it is not really something that we have heard of; it is not something that has been brought up at that level. I did ask Minister Berry about this at an ACTCOSS meeting, and she said that the inclusion coaches or the reason behind them was based on information they had received through the various networks that this is something that was needed. So, I hope that the right stakeholders are going to be talked to when it comes to implementing these.

What we do hope for is that the Education Directorate will, firstly, define “inclusion” and what an inclusive classroom actually looks like. You can have an inclusion coach, but we do not know what inclusion means. I can tell you; I know what inclusion means. But a lot of people have the idea that if you include someone with a disability in something, therefore it is inclusive; whereas it actually means that someone with a disability needs to have the same access as everyone else, maybe with some modifications so that they can learn alongside their peers in a classroom.

It is no good, in my opinion, to have an inclusive classroom where the child with a disability is, maybe, taken out and they learn things separately from the rest of the classroom. It is not inclusive; even though some mainstream schools will say, “We are totally inclusive because we have kids with disabilities in our classes. We just take them aside, and we do special things with kids somewhere else.”

So, back to your question: I hope that we can define what an inclusive classroom actually means and that the inclusion coaches are there to really empower and support teachers and to make the teachers feel supported. One thing we do hear from teachers sometimes is that they are a little bit overwhelmed and that they need the support and information to create that inclusive space. I do not know if that answered your question properly.

MR PETTERSSON: I myself do not really know what an inclusion coach is. This is the first time I am hearing this term, so when did you first—

Ms Kolak: In the budget.

MR PETTERSSON: Okay.

Ms Kolak: We were all shocked. I was in an ACTCOSS meeting when the budget was handed down, and we read about inclusion coaches and we all said, “What is that?” Wow! I love it, and I love that it was mentioned in the budget and there is money going to be put into it. I love that they are trialling it. They are not just going to put it in every school and say it is going to work. They are looking at a pilot program; they are going to put it in some schools. Minister Berry said they are going to then see what works and what does not work, and they are going to create a program that should be rolled out across all schools. So, in theory, that sounds excellent.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Kolak, you were very pragmatic in your opening address regarding access to mental health professionals in that you conceded that there is a problem right across the city and that it affects all Canberrans. I want to know how badly that

lack of access to psychiatrists and other mental health professionals impacts the people under your umbrella.

Ms Kolak: I think mental health concerns are really complex, regardless of who you are, and when you add an intellectual disability to that it puts another huge layer of complexity on top of it. So many times we hear of people with intellectual disability being told by doctors and medical professionals, “It is just because you have a disability—just because you have Down syndrome. You feel this way because of your disability,” when we know that it is not. We know that people with intellectual disability have mental health concerns just like everyone else does. So the need for people with intellectual disability to access mental health services with practitioners who are incredibly skilled in diagnosing and treating those conditions in someone with an intellectual disability is really important.

The clinic that is available in Gungahlin is excellent. It is a government clinic, so it means that people have access to it, but the wait times are really long; but I understand the wait times are long for a lot of clinics in Canberra. We also know that people with intellectual disability may not have access to the funds to seek treatment in private clinics. Even if they have an NDIS package, if mental health or something like mental health is not within their goals and their funding does not cover it, they may not be able to get funding for that until a review in two years time, so having a government-funded clinic like the one in Gungahlin is so incredibly important so people can have access to it.

If you look at the number of people that have intellectual disability in Canberra—I do not have the full figure, but I know that the NDIS is telling us that for people with packages, at the moment, there are 2,658 people in Canberra that have a package under developmental delay, Down syndrome, global development delay and intellectual disability. If you add autism and acquired brain injury to that, we are looking at 6,408 people that have an NDIS package.

We know, though, that those numbers are quite small compared to the actual number of people with disabilities. The listening report for the *Towards a 10-year ACT Disability Strategy* that was released says that there are 80,000 people in the ACT that identify as having a disability. So there are large numbers of people, regardless of who has a package and who does not. We love that there is that one clinic in Gungahlin, it is fabulous, but I am really worried when we have people coming to us needing urgent help and it is a 12-week wait to get an initial appointment, and there really is not anywhere else to go.

On top of that we are an actual referral point for that clinic, and the reason we became a referral point is we found that many GPs in the ACT do not know about it. So a person with an intellectual disability will go to their GP, and their GP will say, “I do not know where you can go”—we get that commonly—“and I do not have a list of practitioners that can understand intellectual disability and bipolar,” for example. So they come to us, and they say, “Do you know where to go?” and we say, “We do.” So we are able to go through all the referral paperwork. I would much prefer if a GP knew about that.

MR PETTERSSON: What is the name of that program?

Ms Kolak: Now I cannot remember off the top of my head. It is the mental health clinic for people with intellectual disability. It is in Gungahlin, and it is amazing. We know people who have gone to that clinic and had enormous amounts of help and who have had a diagnosis made that a GP would never even have considered. It has been completely life changing for them to have a proper diagnosis and medical treatment, and for someone to believe that their mental health issues were not part of having an intellectual disability. It is great. I would love to see more funding and more support and more knowledge about the clinic.

THE CHAIR: We have done exceptionally well. Thank you for being part of the hearings. Nothing was taken on notice, so you are all good.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

Ms Kolak: Excellent; thank you.

Short suspension.

COPLAND, DR SIMON, Executive Director, Pedal Power ACT

THE CHAIR: In this session we are going to hear from Dr Simon Copland, Executive Director of Pedal Power ACT. Proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. If you do take a question on notice it would be useful if you were emphatic in saying “I will take that on notice” so that everyone knows exactly what is going on. Can I remind the witness of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you confirm, Dr Copland, for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it.

Dr Copland: I understand the implications of the privilege statement and I agree to it.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Do you have an opening statement?

Dr Copland: I think the only opening statement is: I am sorry, I think I screwed up your agenda. I think I received the initial invite while I was unwell and I did not put it in my calendar. Then in the kind of haze of being unwell, it slipped by my calendar. You live and die by calendars and it just stuffed up so sorry about that. I am happy just to take questions.

THE CHAIR: That is fine. No, we are glad that you have made it. Some of the media discussion post the budget has involved your good self. I am going to drill down to a specific budget item, and that is the duplication of William Hovell Drive and the additional cost there which is quite substantial. Dr Copland, my understanding is that your organisation is pretty much calling for that duplication not to proceed. Is that correct?

Dr Copland: I think what we are calling for is a broader discussion about the choices we are making in our transport spending. We know that a huge proportion of our transport spending is spent on roads and that road duplications are costing a lot of money—and an increasing amount of money. We know from evidence around the world that duplications often do not work to achieve the initial stated goals and that is to reduce congestion. We have not seen a business case for the William Hovell Drive duplication. We would like to see that, to see whether it is going to meet the goals of what the government is stating in terms of increasing safety and reducing congestion.

But we are sceptical of duplications as being a solution to our transport woes. We are asking for a broader debate about what is a better solution to these transport issues. We think doing the same thing over and over again often does not work and investment in other forms of transport such as active travel or public transport is something we really need to be looking at and increasing that investment is something we should be doing.

THE CHAIR: I was not at the cabinet table when they made decisions on this one nor at the expenditure review committee but my assumption is that much of the impetus for this project is the growing population out in Ginninderry. One of the things that I would ask you is: are you genuinely advocating that someone who lives in Strathnairn should be considering riding their bike to work?

Dr Copland: No. You have asked me this question before I think in previous questioning in previous committees. The answer is that we are not saying that everybody in the far West Belconnen and the far south of Tuggeranong are going to be riding into the city. This is not actually about that and I think it is a little bit of a red herring in this debate. What we want to be doing is finding ways that people can change some of their trips to different forms of transport. People who live in Strathnairn do not just have transport into the city. They would also be travelling to their local shops, to their schools, to their local doctor, to local services. If we can transform some of those trips to public transport, active transport, that takes pressure off the roads for those people who are doing other forms of trips, the longer forms of trips where cars may be required. So it is actually about the trips below five kilometres. The research suggests that those are the trips that people are most likely to shift to active transport. How do we encourage people, and have the safe infrastructure to encourage people, who will be making those trips on active transport, and that reduces congestion for everybody else who has to do longer trips.

THE CHAIR: But, Dr Copland, surely anyone who is driving William Hovell Drive is travelling more than five kilometres?

Dr Copland: Yes, that is potentially true. As I said, what we are looking for is business cases for why this is needed. And as I said, again, the research around the world shows that duplications do not work because people do something called induced demand; they increase the demand. So when you have the better infrastructure, the double the width of the road, the duplicate lanes, more people are inclined to take that particular route and that means the congestion does not actually end up being eased. It ends up just perpetuating the problem, pushing it down the track. You might get a short term gain: a couple of years of reducing congestion but in the long run we still have the same problem over and over again. As I said at the start of this, we are looking for a debate about the different choices that we are making in our infrastructure spend. Could we take some of that money and invest it in active transport infrastructure in West Belconnen, which is horrendous. For many people it just does not exist. People cannot get to the Kippax Shops, cannot get to their local school, cannot get into the Belconnen Town Centre safely. Would that money actually be better spent on that infrastructure?

MS CLAY: In a similar vein, we have a high public desire for transparency on a lot of our major transport projects. I think that is excellent. I think there should be scrutiny and transparency on big ticket items that we are spending on. We have not seen business cases for those roads and we are actually still struggling in our office to count up how much money is spent on roads, but it is several hundred million and we have not seen any business cases. We also similarly had a very good conversation this morning about public transport in West Belconnen and I have not seen any other funding or business cases that would increase our buses, our bus drivers, northside bus depot and all of those things that might integrate active and public transport. Are you surprised at the lack of transparency and scrutiny we get? We get a big focus on some public transport projects but then nothing on other transport projects.

Dr Copland: Yes I am surprised and disappointed by the lack of transparency on these kinds of projects. It is not just William Hovell Drive. William Hovell Drive was

one that was in the media last week because of the massive increase in the amount of spending but we are seeing road duplication projects across the city. We have had the Gundaroo Drive, the Monaro Highway, Athllon Drive which is coming up and we do not see business cases for these. We have a huge public demand for, for example, business cases for the light rail projects, which have been released publicly, but we are not seeing that same public demand for these projects, and, actually, we are spending quite a lot of money on it. We are talking about \$100 million for 4.5 kilometres worth of road here. Yes, we should have transparency for that. I think that is really important. We should be having the debate to suggest if we want to have the kind of mode shift that the government is talking about, that we need to have for reducing congestion, for increasing our health, for reducing emissions, then we need to look at how we can spend our money to properly achieve that. I am not convinced as of yet. You might release a business case and you might convince me. But I am not convinced as of yet that spending over \$100 million on 4.5 kilometres of road is the best solution.

MS CLAY: It is interesting. We are in a challenging time when the costs for our construction projects across the board are going up. Infrastructure Australia tells that is the world now, that is what will continue to happen. So, we are seeing quite a lot of the federal and ACT funded projects increase quite sharply. Do you think that makes a greater need to make the case for what you spend and where, and whether you do it now or later?

Dr Copland: Yes. I understand the government's explanations about why this project has increased quite a bit. We are seeing significant impacts on costs for construction. But to me it also therefore points to the potential benefits of alternative options. We know that around the world—and, in Australia, Sydney and Melbourne—cities have done this very successfully in investing heavily in temporary cycle lanes. These are a very cheap alternative that can be built on the side of roads very, very quickly. By rolling these out, they have seen significant increases in people who are using alternative methods of transport, who are riding their bikes. Now, these are the kinds of things we could be rolling out in a matter of months rather than these kinds of large projects that take years and cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

THE CHAIR: Are they focused on small trips?

Dr Copland: Yes, they often will focus on small trips. So as a West Belconnen example, we could be talking about the western part of Belconnen Way, ensuring people can get in, or Southern Cross Drive, and ensuring people can get into Kippax Shops, ensuring people can get into the Belconnen Shops. This is something we hear from members a lot in West Belconnen actually—that the infrastructure there is so poor that they cannot do those kind of short trips. That kind of thing could be rolled out very quickly with a much smaller amount of money.

Now, we may still need the case for these other projects, for these bigger projects, of course, but I would like to see the business case and I would like to have the discussion about where our spend is going and whether there are better alternatives.

MS CLAY: On my read of the budget, we have around \$10 million on maintenance funding for paths and footpaths, which is much more than we have had in recent years

but it is still quite a small amount given the level of defects and missing links we have. I note your petition for better funding for maintenance. I also note you are petitioning for an accountability indicator that 90 per cent of that network be kept in good condition, which is a call we have made here a few times. We have passed a couple of motions for this. Do you think we are spending enough on maintenance of what we have and do you think there needs to be an accountability indicator so we can actually see what we are doing?

Dr Copland: Yes. One of the issues we have with maintenance again is the transparency around it. We know the ACT government has a list of maintenance projects. Last year there was an FOI of that list. It came up to thousands of projects of maintenance, but we still do not know what the timetable is to fix those projects. Those projects on their list are in order. It obviously would be out of date from the FOI because it would have changed since then, but we do not know how long it takes to get through that list. We do not know whether that list of thousands of projects is going to take them five years, 10 years, 20 years.

We would like some transparency around that to really understand, if we are increasing the budget by 40 per cent on maintenance, how much more is that going to actually achieve? How much is it going to get through that list? And if someone puts something on the list, are they going to be expecting that it is going to take 10 years for it to be fixed or one year for it to be fixed?

THE CHAIR: Good question.

Dr Copland: We do not know the answer to that. That is very frustrating. We get this frustration from our members all the time, who will get in contact with us and say, “This is really dangerous. This thing here in Tuggeranong or this thing in Belconnen”—wherever it is—“is really dangerous,” and we go, “Well, you can put it on Fix Your Street” but there is no actual mechanism. They get an email saying it has been lodged, but there is nobody actually saying, “This is when it is going to be fixed. This is what we are up to.” We have no idea.

Some transparency would be a great first step and then I think the accountability measure of saying the government has to reach a target is the next step. We have that target for roads. I think that target is good for roads. We need to have safe roads. I want to have safe roads. Nobody is denying the need for safe roads, but why do we not have the same requirement for safe paths and cycle networks?

This is the other thing we get: people have accidents. We provide insurance to people and people have accidents because of the poor infrastructure. I have had accidents because of the poor infrastructure riding on a shared path where it is cracked or there are roots in the way, or I have come close to accidents because of that. So we need to have an accountability measure for peoples’ safety as a baseline. The 90 per cent accountability measure is what we have for roads and we argued for the same for our shared paths.

MR PETERSSON: Canberra is a bit of a cycling mecca for locals and visitors. What can and should the ACT government do to make Canberra a more attractive destination for people who want to come for a holiday and cycle a lot?

Dr Copland: I think we are actually at the risk of Canberra losing the status as being a cycling mecca. I think that is the biggest fear I have when you ask that question. We look at cities around the world and cities in Australia: they are investing heavily in cycling infrastructure, both for commuters but also for people who want to visit. My reading and the reading of the people in our organisation is that Canberra has become a little bit complacent and in turn that we risk losing a lot of that status.

If we look at the percentage of people who ride bikes in Canberra, we are still higher than other cities in Australia but only marginally, and when compared to cities around the world all of Australia is falling way, way behind. This is not just in Europe. I think people point to Europe, but it is actually in the United States as well. In New Zealand places like Wellington are really investing huge amounts of money in cycling infrastructure and that is transforming how people travel. It is also creating these places as spaces that people want to go to. Really no Australian city is doing that to the same level yet, although we see that Sydney and Melbourne in particular are starting to shift the way they think about cycling and really shifting where they spend their money. So I think we need to stop the complacency is the first thing. We keep talking about Canberra being a cycling mecca. I think we need to live up to that by continuing to invest. Then the core things would be to be investing in our cycling network and be doing it a lot faster than what we have provided, and then we can also be investing in our tourist destinations.

One thing we were certainly very pleased with was the announcement around Stromlo Forest Park in terms of their new flow trail and the investment with the University of Canberra. Although we still think that some of the maintenance funding is probably still not going to be quite to what it needs to be and so we are hoping for more investment there. We have called for \$300,000 a year. I think the announcement was \$1 million over five years, so it is not going to quite reach that funding. There are other ways of raising funds, for example, from the new parking, but it is hard to put all those sums together. We know from feedback that a lot of people feel that those trails have been degraded and that the Stromlo Forest Park is not the destination it used to be.

The second thing that we have is not just about mountain biking, but a lot of people come to Canberra because of our cycling around the lakes, for example. A lot of the lake infrastructure is also starting to get very old. So working with the National Capital Authority—which I know is difficult—around Lake Burley Griffin is probably the most important one. We are happy to see the funding that is going into the Lake Ginninderra path. There has been some work done in Lake Tuggeranong and there are some upgrades to Yerrabi Pond as well, but really turning those into world-class cycling trips would be a way to bring more people into Canberra and to really invest in the city.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. Comprehensive. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Dr Copland, I know in your role you have this macro view, but then there will be all sorts of people coming to you with tiny little micro issues.

Dr Copland: All the time, yes.

THE CHAIR: This is probably in the realm of the micro issue when it all boils down. If I were to make a list of all the punctured tubes I have had in my entire life, more than 50 per cent of them would be on the one road. You know which road it is, do you not?

Dr Copland: I am going to say the Monaro Highway. Right?

THE CHAIR: Yes, it is. What do you do about that? What can the government do about that?

Dr Copland: I have never ridden on the Monaro Highway myself, but I could use the example of Flemington Road, which I do ride quite a bit. One of the issues I face on Flemington Road when you are riding on that on-road lane is that there is always debris on it. Often glass. I ride past Mitchell. It is kind of an industrial area, so there is glass, bits of wood, sometimes obstacles. Riding down Northbourne Avenue there is construction all the time, and often the kind of debris that we would not accept on our roads somehow ends up on these cycle lanes.

I think there are a couple of things that we should be doing. One is increasing the maintenance—the cleaning and stuff—on the paths. This is not about a road, but we saw recently that the City Renewal Authority has bought an electric street sweeper that is going to be used on the pavement around different parts of the city. We often, particularly in autumn, get lots of complaints from our members about leaf litter all over our cycle paths. It becomes quite dangerous, particularly when it gets wet; it becomes very slippery. We have made representations to the government about how we can better keep our shared paths clean so they are safe for people, and we get a non-response. So even investing in things like street sweepers, that are not just for the inner city but for all parts of Canberra. We have street sweepers for roads but having them for shared paths would be very valuable. Then on the on-road cycle lanes, having consistent cleaning there as well.

I would say with something like Monaro Highway, there has been a lot of discussion about the construction of a separated cycle lane, similar to that part of Majura Parkway. I have used it multiple times and I feel safer and also cleaner than if I were to ride on the road. I have ridden that quite a few times. The advice we have received from the government is that they feel it is too expensive during the duplication there to add in a separated lane. We are worried it will not be built, and that is disappointing and frustrating because it means that you still get stuck on the road in that instance.

Going back to the question about duplications, for example, we still think there should be a discussion about whether duplication is the best thing to do but when they are happening, the minimum is that they should also include a separated shared path or cycle lane. We know that is happening with William Hovell Drive and we support that. We are not sure that is going to happen with Monaro Highway and that is a real worry for us. That would help solve some of your problems because you do not get the debris from the cars coming off when it is a separated infrastructure. There are some concerns about that that we have, for example. So there are lots of things you can do. Increasing cleaning, increasing maintenance and just building the separated infrastructure that means you do not get the debris from cars, or you do not get the

debris from the things falling off trucks or whatever it is.

THE CHAIR: All right. It being 2 o'clock, we might have to pull the curtain on that but I am glad you made it.

Dr Copland: Yes. Again, I am sorry about making mistakes with your schedule.

THE CHAIR: It is all right. It is fine.

Dr Copland: I appreciate your flexibility.

THE CHAIR: No, you are right. So, no questions taken on notice. Thanks for coming.

Dr Copland: Thank you very much for having me.

Short suspension.

SINGER, MRS ELIZABETH, President, ACT Gifted Families Support Group

THE CHAIR: We are going to move on to session number 12, which will involve Mrs Elizabeth Singer, at the ACT Gifted Families Support Group, and we certainly welcome her to the chamber.

These proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed, and they will be published on the Assembly website. If you do take a question on notice, it would be helpful if you could emphatically state, "I will take that question on notice." I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Mrs Singer: I understand the privilege statement, and I agree to it.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Mrs Singer, do you have an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Mrs Singer: I do; I have a short one.

THE CHAIR: Excellent.

Mrs Singer: Thank you for inviting the ACT Gifted Families Support Group to appear before the committee today. ACT parents, carers, community members and students rely on the ACT budget to fund measures that decrease inequality in the ACT, especially in our public schools. Gifted education has again been overlooked as an area of concern that needs investment from the government to provide specific funds for the education of gifted students.

Our core message is equity in educational choice and provision, particularly for gifted students. Public schools are meant to be designed to serve everyone and this includes gifted students. If that education is to be no longer thought of as only being needed for highly affluent children of white or Asian descent, then that education is to be more inclusive and serving of all gifted students, including those who may be from a disadvantaged background; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; students with disability; students from low socio-economic backgrounds; students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; and students who are at risk.

Our NAPLAN and PISA test scores highlight the lack of the presence of these students amongst our high achieving. Evidence from other states in Australia and around the world demonstrates that where the government allocates funds, even as little as a few per cent for each identified gifted student, it provides the stimulus for schools to identify and provide for gifted children.

THE CHAIR: Excellent, thank you. Talk to me about investment in this area. You have bemoaned the lack of investment from the ACT government. Let's talk specifics and actual numbers. If you were in charge, what sort of funding would you like to see directed to this?

Mrs Singer: A small amount would make a difference. We are talking about 1½ per cent above a standard, and that would provide principals with funding that would allow them to invest in more equitable measures of identification for our gifted students. Some of our public schools currently run some form of identification, but not all of them, and it would also allow them to cover professional development.

We find that in the ACT the knowledge of gifted education, because it is seen as a specialty amongst our public schools, is not spread equally across the system. There are some schools that have a great wealth of knowledge, and some schools where our parents are reporting the principal as saying, “Oh no, we don’t have a gifted program at our school because we don’t have any gifted children.” And I am saying, “No, you just haven’t found them.” So that would be why the funds are important.

Gifted students in ACT public schools are not counted. We count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; we count students with a disability; we have an idea of the total number of low SES students we have; but we do not have any idea of how many gifted students have been identified and are in a program at their local primary school, or high school, or college.

THE CHAIR: Please excuse my ignorance in this space, because it is not a portfolio area that I deal in often. You have indicated that not all schools have a gifted and talented program, but from my understanding of the way things worked historically—and I say “historically” because my girls are 23 and 21, and they went through a gifted and talented program at Kaleen primary. At the time there were a number of schools around the place that had a gifted and talented program. Is that how it works? Is it just ad hoc, based on the autonomy of the principal at the school?

Mrs Singer: So when your children were at school, Kaleen Primary School did have a gifted program. That was before the education department, because it was having problems with student capacity, created A group enrolment schools and B group enrolment schools.

THE CHAIR: Right, okay.

Mrs Singer: So it basically forced parents to go to their local primary school, which meant that you did not have the choice of going to Kaleen, or you did not have the choice to enrol in the enriched academic program at the Lyneham High School, or you did not have the choice to go to the program at Garran Primary School. And so that has narrowed—that shift in the enrolment policy means that your local public school is responsible for its gifted program.

THE CHAIR: Alright; thank you.

MS CLAY: Thank you for that comprehensive statement. It is also a new field to me, but I am interested. I have heard that we have got some data from the past decade that twice exceptional children—children who are gifted and also have some kind of different learning experience or disability—are quite a growing cohort. I have also heard that that is one of our fastest growing cohorts that are ending up in home-schooling. Have you observed that same phenomenon, in that people who are twice gifted are maybe being withdrawn and home-schooled?

Mrs Singer: Yes, home-schooling is definitely an option for some gifted families if their child needs to be accelerated, or if their school does not have a program, or in terms of twice exceptional learners.

There was a study done within the past 10 years of some New South Wales and some ACT home-schooling families that found that nearly half of them were families where the children were twice exceptional. Having a twice exceptional child means, first of all, you have to particularly look at your identification measures, from the school point of view, to find the giftedness, because it can hide, and it needs special learning plans for each child in the gifted program so that they have the learning outcomes that they are capable of. The parents take the option of home-schooling because they cannot find that in their local public high school or primary school.

MS CLAY: Do you think we are supporting that option adequately in the ACT or is there something more we should be doing?

Mrs Singer: I think it would be better for the ACT as a whole, if we managed to provide learning for our teachers and our school principals so that we can support them in our public schools so that gifted students are taught there. I notice that to home-school a child—and I know that it is the choice of a lot of our families, and I do not want to take that away from them—it often takes a parent out of the workforce, because they are at home teaching their child. I think for the ACT economy, and for Australia as a whole, having that opportunity for both parents to participate in the workforce, if they want to, is a much better way to go.

I think having twice exceptional learners in our classrooms with other twice exceptional learners helps all of them. Some families can afford the option of home-schooling within their financial circumstances, and that is fine. But we have also got to remember that we have got these twice exceptional learners that sit in our public schools that may have a single parent who has to work, or other such responsibilities, who do not have that option, and they are not getting their needs met.

So while we have some fantastic home-schooling parents that are doing amazing things with their children, and it is a great option for them, we are not providing in our public schools that opportunity for these children. It goes back to the fact that if we had funding and asked our school principals, “Well, find them and tell us how many you have,” and then gave them some money to support that and support the teacher development that they need around that—it is a much better choice.

MS CLAY: It is primarily funding that we need to identify gifted children and twice exceptional children? Is this mostly a funding issue?

Mrs Singer: It is funding that would go into identification and teacher development. It costs money for a school to take the whole year 1 body and assess them for giftedness, because you have to take teachers off classes; you have to pay for the appropriate assessment tools that you are going to use. And we are not talking about distressing children with something that is a really big test. We are talking about something that is really friendly, and there are really quite good ways of doing this, but schools are not doing that at the moment—that is our feedback from our

members—and, therefore, they are not identifying them. By setting it up as a funded measure, school principals can say, “I have this money. This is what it is meant to be spent on. This is how I am going to spend it.”

MS CLAY: Thank you. If we are not doing this, you may not be able to answer this question, but do you have any idea what percentage of kids might be gifted and twice exceptional? Is it a large cohort?

Mrs Singer: Around Australia, the theory behind gifted education is that it is roughly 10 per cent of our population—that is, the children that would benefit from what we would call being put together in this particular gifted education environment. For the stats on twice exceptional there have been two studies done—one by a Queensland researcher and one done by a Wollongong researcher. It varies amongst the cohort of gifted kids as being between seven per cent and 15 per cent, so it is not a small number of children.

MS CLAY: No, not at all; thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you, and you will have to forgive my ignorance on this issue as well. I did not go through the gifted and talented programs myself. Explain to me what happens when you have got a kid going to a school that does not have a standalone gifted and talented program. They get identified as being gifted and talented; they go into the local public school. What are the supports that are made available or the programs for that, maybe, sole individual?

Mrs Singer: We find that schools that do not have programs also are not identifying the children. So there is not classroom support from the teacher for that child. There is no capacity in that school: there is no planning capacity and no programs for that child at all. We find that some of those families, those families that can, try to move their child from their local public school to an enrolment type B public school, where the principal may have some more knowledge on gifted.

But we also have to think about all the families where the parents are not going to recognise it—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, where the family is not going to recognise it. There is no advocacy on behalf of the child from a parent, because they do not have that knowledge. For a portion of our disadvantaged gifted and talented students, they are relying on our school principals and our schoolteachers to be able to identify them and to be able to serve their population.

MR PETTERSSON: So, for the schools that do have these programs in place, there is more of a cultural awareness of the existence of these kids, so the teachers are identifying them? Or is it a more kind of rigorous, systematic approach with testing to identify the kids?

Mrs Singer: Testing can be part of how you identify gifted children, but not always, and especially when we are looking for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methods. There are more culturally friendly methods to do so. Some of our high schools definitely run some academic testing that does identify a group of gifted students for their school, and then they are put in a program.

In schools that have had long-term gifted programs, still in the system, you find that you have a teacher that has done some training in gifted education that mentors the teachers coming through so that you have knowledge, and you have teachers doing this specialist learning in gifted and talented education. They then mentor the next lot of teachers going through. Some of our programs have been running since the 1980s in some of our high schools and primary schools, but some of them are dropping them now because they do not have the number of schools.

If you look at a system like the Catholic diocese in Sydney, they have moved to a thing called “Newman schools”, and Newman schools are where their local Catholic school applies to be a gifted-recognised school. They have a postgrad unit of work that has been designed for all teachers at that school to complete—not just the one or two on a gifted class, all teachers. And then they have an appropriate program and an appropriate identification measure.

As you know, New South Wales public schools have selective schools, but they also have the provision in their policy where all public schools have to have in their documentation improvement plans how they are going to deal with their gifted and talented population. Apart from the highly publicised selective schools, there are a lot of other primary schools and high schools that are doing a lot for gifted students, but there is a lot more to do. I could keep going.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Obviously, because this is an estimates committee, we are focusing on the ACT budget—

Mrs Singer: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I want to know: what are the offerings in the ACT from the non-government schools in this space? How are they different from what is being offered by government schools?

Mrs Singer: I cannot talk for every single independent school or Catholic school. I can say that we do have members in independent schools and Catholic schools that are very happy with the identification processes and the offerings. I know that there has been a professional development program run for teachers in independent schools across the last few years in the ACT. For example, Canberra Girls Grammar is up-front about their provision on their website, and I brought their wording today—what they have said in a short couple of paragraphs. They identify them, and they provide for them.

THE CHAIR: So, if indeed we focus on a worst-possible case scenario, which in this space would be that ACT government schools pretty much ceased catering for gifted and talented students, how would you describe the level of that missed opportunity, not just for those children but for the actual entire community?

Mrs Singer: It is massive. There are a lot of examples, if we look historically, of people that have been through gifted programs that have contributed to society as a whole in terms of research, in terms of comedy, in terms of all other areas of life. It

does have quite an impact, and we would be holding back a whole lot of people that have this ability to learn to do things, and we also then have a negative impact on their wellbeing as teenagers and as adults.

There is a really good story about gifted children by a woman called Stephanie Tolan called something like “Is It a Tiger?” or “Is it a Leopard”. She talks about the difference between a leopard or a tiger in a cage, and a leopard being free. For gifted children, when we find them and provide them with an education that they need, they are like the leopards running free: they develop properly. We know that they add to community not only through their work but also by giving back to community groups and things like that. We have got a lot of research that talks about this—that they are very effective members of society. If we do not do that, it is their knowledge, but also their mental health and wellbeing, that suffers.

THE CHAIR: Good answer. You have done well.

Mrs Singer: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for coming. Thanks for a part of our hearings. Nothing taken on notice, so that is all good.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

Short suspension.

HENNESSY, DR BIANCA, Research and Policy Officer, Australian Education Union

BURROUGHS, MS ANGELA, Branch President, Australian Education Union

THE CHAIR: Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen. In this session we are going to speak with representatives of the Australian Education Union. The proceedings today are being broadcast live. They are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. If you do make the call to take a question on notice, it would be useful if you could say the words, emphatically, “I will take that question on notice,” because then everyone will know what is going on.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms Burroughs: Yes, I do understand and I agree.

Dr Hennessy: I also understand and agree.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Would you like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Ms Burroughs: Yes, I would; thank you very much. In the past week I have had the honour of attending the Education International World Congress. At that congress it was made clear that there was an urgency of education funding and that that urgency is understood by some political leaders. This is driven in large part by the magnitude of the teacher shortage, which is estimated at a global level to be as much as 70 million.

Political leaders that understand the urgency of properly funding public education understand an investment in teaching is an investment for a better future. They understand that there is no better investment than quality education to ensure that every student is taught by a professionally qualified, well-supported teacher in a quality learning environment. In short, they understand the need for investing in teachers and investing in infrastructure.

It is against that background that the AEU welcomes the fact that the 2023-24 ACT budget makes a record investment in public education. There are two main ways it does this: through funding of our new teaching staff enterprise agreement and through infrastructure spending.

The enterprise agreement will commence in the coming weeks. It ensures that our teachers remain the highest paid in Australia. Additionally, it involves a salary reclassification that has been funded in this budget. The salary component will go some way to ameliorating the teacher shortage in the medium term.

We know that graduate teachers were not choosing careers in public education because of competitive beginning salaries elsewhere. We also know that we are losing early career teachers quicker than we can replace them. We still have work to do to

make teaching the kind of job you want to do for a long time. But competitive salaries for early career teachers is a great start.

We also welcome the budget's record investment in school infrastructure, including new schools and upgrade to existing sites. Expanding universal preschool to three-year-olds is another project we are proud of.

At the AEU we wear two hats. We are the industrial representatives of public educators and we are also the professional voice of teachers in the ACT public education system.

Teachers are experts on teaching, which is why we are happy to present systemic and targeted solutions like those in our budget submission and work with the Education Directorate to solve problems together. Ultimately, teachers want to see tangible, real differences to their daily working lives that will translate to meaningful improvement to learning conditions. We look forward to answering your questions about how to make this a reality.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. I think we will sail straight in. You spoke of the urgency of education funding. Does the ACT government fully comprehend that urgency? You reflect on the record investment. Is it enough?

Ms Burroughs: Well, of course it is not enough, although we are the only jurisdiction that does receive 100 per cent of the school resourcing standard. But you would expect a teacher union to always argue that we could do with more.

THE CHAIR: I understand.

Ms Burroughs: Some of those challenges relate to keeping our experienced educators in the workforce. They relate to challenges to do with workload and they relate to the inclusive education agenda, which is, as far as we can see, an ambitious agenda that we are fully supportive of but at the moment is unfunded.

THE CHAIR: How effective do you believe the increase in salaries will be in retaining and attracting teachers?

Ms Burroughs: The only evidence base that we have is that various studies have indicated that the teaching crisis is such that a reasonable increase in salary has to be applied to be able to get the uplift in beginner teachers. The basis of that research was a beginner teacher salary of about \$90,000 increasing to \$100,000. Our agreement does that.

At the other end, in terms of experienced teachers, the recommendation was that an experienced teacher, top of the scale teacher, salary at \$130,000 would create a measurable difference to increasing the retention of experienced teachers. Our agreement almost does that. It is \$129,000 and some hundreds. So it is not quite at \$130,000 but it is very close.

So, on the basis of the evidence that we are aware of, we believe that this is a very good start to achieving those changes.

MS CLAY: I was interested to read in your pre-budget submission about the need for free child care as a retention strategy for your teaching workforce, which makes a lot of sense to me. We were very pleased, of course, to see some level of free child care for three-year-olds. The Greens took that to an election in 2020 and we kept getting told it was impossible. So it is nice to see that it is not impossible.

Do you have the details on what that will look like? Have you had a chance to unpack that and see how effective, in offering that, that might be for your teaching workforce in retention and recruitment?

Ms Burroughs: For three-year-olds?

MS CLAY: Yes; providing free childcare for three-year-olds, which allows people who are teachers to teach.

Ms Burroughs: I see. We do not have that evidence, because it has not been implemented yet other than in a piloted way in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, who can currently access the free three-year-old preschool. So, because it has not been implemented yet, we are not aware.

Our submission was based on what you have identified: that we have a very highly feminised workforce—about 80 per cent of our workforce are women—and that a lot of them take parenting leave. But it is not only the female members but also the male members of the profession who need to access parenting leave.

When we have a crisis in our teacher shortage to the extent that we have, you have to try everything. It will be implemented from next year. We are pleased that it is implemented in a staged way rather than the full-blown way that some other jurisdictions are going, because we do not believe the staffing is there to be able to support it in a more comprehensive measure.

MS CLAY: Have your members been telling you that this might help with retention? Are you finding that it is not just that people temporarily leave the workforce but also that they were permanently leaving the workforce in order to parent and not returning?

Dr Hennessy: I just want to separate that out. We are talking about two things here. The first is the expansion to the provision of universal free preschool—and we are thrilled about that. It is going to be one day a week to start with but with a view to expand it. As Angela said, there are workforce constraints that are quite severe in early childhood education.

The other thing that our budget submission talked about is enabling access to child care more generally for teaching parents. That came out of the Teacher Shortage Taskforce, which was a collaboration between the Education Directorate and us as the union.

What we have identified, I guess perhaps anecdotally through talking to our thousands of members every single day, is that a lot of the time our members will take parenting

leave for an extended period of time and then look at the cost of child care and the demands on the life of a teacher during term time and say, “This is not really worth it.”

The minister has quite helpfully agreed—and agreed very quickly and vigorously—to all of the 20 recommendations of that task force. One of those was to consider the ways that we might expand childcare access to those teaching parents. We are not quite sure exactly what form that looks like. We are still trying to implement all of those recommendations. Some of them are funded through the budget, some of them are funded through our enterprise agreement and some of them we are still working on what that looks like.

MS CLAY: So this might be an excellent question for next year.

Dr Hennessy: Absolutely.

MS CLAY: To see how it went and to see where the gaps are.

Dr Hennessy: Yes; cannot wait.

MS CLAY: That is great. Thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: I am not across the details of the enterprise agreement. What are the key components that reduce workload pressure and do they go far enough?

Ms Burroughs: There are three major components. The first is the expansion of the pupil free days from the current one day to one per term—so an additional three. The most significant change, however, is the release time that is factored into the working week of a teacher.

Currently the only stipulation in the enterprise agreement about your working week is that it consists of a certain number of hours of which X are face-to-face teaching. It does not give any consideration to the planning and preparation that you have to do to deliver those nor the work following delivery in assessing, reporting and feeding back.

For the first time, our agreement indicates that a 10-hour period—sort of like half an hour for every hour, more or less, of face to face should be a part of your workload. We see that as a very significant development.

The other major development is the establishment of a Sustainable Workload Management Committee with a commitment from the Education Directorate to work with the union and with coalface teachers, principals and school leaders to identify systematic workload reductions that are required.

This is the one that is of most interest to our members, because there is a deficit of trust in relation to this. This is the one that we know that, for a workload reduction to be achieved and for a sustainable workload to be achieved, the union needs to hold the government to account in relation to some tangible outcomes being delivered over the course of the agreement. Have I missed any?

Dr Hennessy: That is about it, I think. I will add to that. We are commencing a pretty significant body of work over the rest of the year, the next two terms, to make sure that our members know every single thing in the agreement that might help them in this regard and to make sure that our members feel really supported to extend that understanding to the community who might not understand the limits on teachers' time and the fact that teachers do so many things which might be invisible to them.

Speaking of those things, I was watching some of the proceedings from earlier today and all of the wonderful community groups that we have. I would just say that proper funding of social and health services is something that reduces teachers' workload because it means that teachers are not the people left to try to scramble to find support for students who really need it.

MR PETTERSSON: With these newfound wins to reduce workload pressure and, as has been mentioned, there is definitely a teacher shortage, how do you make sure that teachers actually get to utilise these reductions in front-facing teaching if there are not enough teachers in the classroom?

Ms Burroughs: That is a really good question. You can win a whole lot of good entitlements—and I think one of the ones that we did forget from the earlier listing was a reduction in face-to-face for new educators, to make beginning teaching more attractive—but it is one thing to win them and it is another to have them applied.

We have some mechanisms that are not as strong as they should be in relation to ensuring that these entitlements are accessed. For instance, every school has an enterprise agreement implementation plan that is signed off between the school leadership—so the principal and union leadership—that the entitlements are being met and how they might be met at that particular site, because they can be amended locally. That process, while great on paper, is not fully implemented in every site.

So an obvious thing that we would need to ensure is that those discussions are occurring on a school-by-school basis and that we are sharing best practice with different schools so that everyone can benefit from these entitlements.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Your budget submission includes among its recommendations that the government needed a one to 500 psychologists to student ratio. How far shy are we of that? Sometimes we feel silly being the committee that is examining the budget because we do not have intimate knowledge of every line of it, and so sometimes we ask questions that maybe you are aware of but we have not had a look at. Is there movement in that space to get to that ratio level?

Ms Burroughs: We might need to take that one on notice, because we are not at it and my sense is that we have actually gone backwards. But I would need to check those figures.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Are you aware of any funding movement in that space?

Ms Burroughs: No. That part of our submission was not funded—and not funded

because it would be funding something that was not achievable. There is a recognition that there just are not psychologists out there.

THE CHAIR: I understand.

MS CLAY: We have a lot of very pragmatic and polite stakeholders today. Thank you for your patience. There is a lot in your submission, and I could pick off a few bits, but I would actually rather just pause and ask: is there anything else in there that is important that government has not yet addressed? You have raised a lot of different issues in there.

Dr Hennessy: We certainly have. There is something on my list of things that we would love to tell you today, which is that we are really pleased to see the funding of inclusive education coaches in the Tuggeranong network schools. That is fantastic. It represents a fraction of what we proposed might be the gold standard—and we expected that; that is okay.

Schools over the recent years, because of the teacher shortage, have seen a pretty severe diminishing of the expert inclusive support available to them to make sure that every student has their needs met in the classroom. We think that this pilot and this funding commitment is fabulous. We are very confident that it will show great results for those schools in Tuggeranong, and we cannot wait to see it expanded, if that is at all possible.

The best standard for inclusive education that we have seen in the territory so far is when teachers who are experts in inclusion can work collaboratively with allied health professionals, with families, with school leadership and with the NDIS and everybody is in the room together talking about how to best deliver supports to the student. We hope that we are getting back towards that model, workforce constraints notwithstanding.

MS CLAY: Codesign always delivers better results.

Dr Hennessy: Absolutely.

MS CLAY: You made a few comments about CIT. Is there anything that you want to draw out about CIT that we are not doing? Is there any way that we need to be supporting that better?

Dr Hennessy: We have been having conversations in our branch lately about the fact that in the ACT we have two arms of public education. One of them is public schools and one of them is CIT. Often we do not talk about there being two and we do not talk about the fact that they could have a really strong relationship that sometimes we do not invest in enough.

We would love to see a focus on insourcing when it comes to supports given to students at CIT. We know that the demand for different types of supports for students at CIT, which we went into in that submission, has increased since the introduction of fee-free TAFE. We would love to see a strengthening of the relationships between high schools and colleges and CIT, so that public education and vocational training

providers are really talking to each other and able to collaborate on the best pathways for all students. That would make a lot of our members very happy.

Ms Burroughs: It certainly would. I guess the only other thing to add about CIT is that, if the strategic direction for CIT is to be one of expansion, it needs to be resourced.

MR PETTERSSON: There is always a steady stream of announcements about new schools getting built. There is less a stream of announcements of older schools getting modernised. Is the rate at which we modernise the older builds in line with your members' expectations?

Ms Burroughs: No.

Dr Hennessy: No. We cannot wait to come back to this building and talk about the infrastructure inquiry. We made pretty detailed suggestions in that submission. I would say that there are few schools in the system where the facilities are where they need to be. We are majorly playing catch-up.

Ms Burroughs: There is a significant backlog in capital works and maintenance.

MR PETTERSSON: When you say that there are only a few schools that kind of get the green flag or a thumbs up, how many are we talking about? Are we talking about a handful of schools that are all thumbs up?

Ms Burroughs: A handful of schools that have adequate infrastructure, yes. We are talking just a handful of schools that can operate sufficiently. But, in terms of how you want to present a quality public education system, there are considerable improvements that we would like to see in terms of infrastructure and capital works programs and maintenance, including greater transparency of that capital works program.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for being a part of our hearings. We appreciate your presence.

Ms Burroughs: Thank you very much.

Dr Hennessy: Thanks for having us.

THE CHAIR: There was a question you took on notice regarding psychologists. Once you receive the uncorrected proof transcript, if you could provide answers to the committee secretary five days after that, if that is possible, that is what we are looking for.

Hearing suspended from 2.46 pm to 3 pm.

BARKER, DR JUSTIN, Chief Executive Officer, Youth Coalition of the ACT

THE CHAIR: We now welcome Dr Justin Barker, from the Youth Coalition of the ACT.

I advise you that today's proceedings are being broadcast live. There are thousands of people watching, which is amazing. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, if you choose to do so, it would be helpful if you emphatically say, "I will take that question on notice," and then everyone will be on the same page.

I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Dr Barker: I do understand the statement and I do agree to it.

THE CHAIR: Dr Barker, would you like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Dr Barker: Yes; just very briefly.

THE CHAIR: Excellent.

Dr Barker: Thank you. The 2023-24 ACT budget is a promising budget for children, young people and their families. It signals an awareness of and response to many issues and opportunities in the community that need to be addressed. While no one budget answers all of our needs, this budget has responded to emerging and ongoing needs for young people.

I would like to talk briefly about three domains of concerns for young people and their families in the ACT: mental health and wellbeing, housing and homelessness and raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

The Youth Coalition welcomes the funding allocated to youth mental health services and the short-term funding for Stepping Stones and the WOKE program. These two vital programs that, if anything, need to be increased in size, will both require ongoing funding. We are very grateful that the government has reached out to save these programs that lost their commonwealth funding, providing a short-term lifeline. We now need to undertake urgent planning to ensure that we do not create more gaps in a mental health system that already has so many missing pieces.

Towards this end, we welcome the funding allocated to the establishment of the ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance, which aims to foster a coherent and purposeful integrated service system. We welcome the funding to progress the development of the Youth Foyer model at CIT, along with the funding to increase public housing dwellings.

The foyer model is a key part of a functioning youth homelessness sector and a

homelessness sector more broadly. Foyer models are for young people engaged in education, employment and/or training who are experiencing youth homelessness. Yet, most of our most vulnerable and at risk young people are unable to engage in education, employment and training because of their homelessness without first being provided stable and secure accommodation and support.

We currently do not have a service that specifically targets this complex and vulnerable population group. A Housing First for Youth model would provide an approach to work with this group. It is one of the most effective ways to stop pathways into adult homelessness and to improve the trajectory of young people's lives who have experienced very serious disadvantage.

The Youth Coalition called for funding for a service system to enable the reforms to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility. We are very pleased to see that funding has been allocated to implement key aspects of this service system, including functional family therapy, youth justice, the therapeutic support panel and the intensive case management.

It is absolutely vital that the services that we fund address the needs adequately of the young people and the families in the community. This funding is a great starting point to develop the proof of concept and to scope the ongoing service needs to support this landmark reform to improve the outcomes for the whole community. It will be essential to evaluate, support and monitor these responses to continue to refine the services to make this work in the way that we know it can for the community.

THE CHAIR: I am going to start off with something left of field. I have a funny feeling that you had views on this but, if you do not and you want me to go to something else, just let me know. It is on the CSD, the commissioning process that we set of service delivery in the community space. The feedback that I have received on the ground is that it is a little problematic. Do you have any views on that process—how it has been rolled out and how it is going to affect service delivery in that space?

Dr Barker: I think commissioning is a great endeavour. We need to make sure we are using the money effectively in the community sector to maximise outcomes for the community. I think the government has had some teething problems with the way it has gone about conducting the commissioning in different domains and different areas, because it is quite different in the homelessness sector, and the child, youth and family sector and the mental health sector are being done differently. I think that it has been a learning experience for government.

I think we need to make sure that we continue to monitor how well it is done and learn to continue to do it better. It has not been smooth sailing. It has been quite difficult and caused some disruption. I think this process always does. I think it has caused more disruption than it needed to, but I am hoping that we will learn from that and we figure out how to do it more effectively moving forward. I do not see it as a point-in-time activity. It is something that we need to continue to monitor and to refresh to make sure the services meet the needs of the community. Does that make sense?

THE CHAIR: Yes, it does. I think it is pretty clear that it has been a learning

experience. Well, I hope that lessons have been learnt. Sometimes lessons are not learnt and people just sort of march along. What I am concerned about is that many of the community organisations that we are talking about in the space that we are dealing with cannot really afford to have a road bump created by a learning experience. I am certainly concerned about some extremely suboptimal outcomes for vulnerable people in vulnerable spaces as a consequence of the teething problems in this commissioning process. Do you subscribe to those fears of mine?

Dr Barker: I do not know if I would say I subscribe to them in the same words. I had concerns that this commission process has disrupted service provision and a culture of service provision unnecessarily in some areas. I will use the housing and homelessness sector as the one that is further ahead than others. We are yet to see how that is going to progress. I think it has been troublesome and it has been disruptive.

We need to make sure that we are producing a better system and that the commissioning is not disrupting it and making things more difficult. So I think I do agree that it has been an unnecessary road bump and unnecessarily cumbersome.

THE CHAIR: Is there a fear that there may be a number of organisations who are providing good outcomes who may find themselves cut out of that service delivery because they have not been able to navigate this commissioning process with the same level of expertise that they managed the provision of services in the space?

Dr Barker: I think that that is a possibility. We do not know yet. We are not at the point in any of the commissioning processes as yet where the decisions have been made who is going to get money and who is not. So that is a possibility, and we will need to watch out for that.

But we have not had that happen as yet because we have not had any definitive announcements about funding even in the housing and homelessness sector where I think that that first round of procurements is only just having those decisions made now. But it is a strong possibility.

THE CHAIR: I just thought it was important to get on the record a public discussion about this process, because I do not believe it has been discussed publicly anywhere in terms of the problems that are being experienced. So I am pleased that we were able to do that.

MS CLAY: Dr Barker, thank you for talking about the Housing First for Youth program. We have had a lot of conversation about the lack of public housing and social and community housing. Interestingly, the Master Builders Association and the Real Estate Institute agreed that we needed a lot more, as has just about every community sector representative, I think, who has come in today.

Do you think we need significantly more public housing and community and social housing? Can you tell me how you would see Housing First for Youth fitting in and whether you have got any costings behind it?

Dr Barker: Yes, we definitely need a greater supply of these affordable housing options in the ACT. One of the things that we need to make sure of is that some of that

housing is specifically allocated to young people. At the moment, there are fewer exit points for young people into the housing market. They face a range of discriminations by landlords in the private sector and they also meet that same discrimination sometimes in public housing, because they think they are not going to be able to maintain tenancy in the same way as older people. There is no proof of that. In actual fact, many of these young people have living skills far superior to adults that I know.

So we need to make sure that a proportion of the housing is allocated to the size of the youth homelessness population group. Otherwise, homeless young people get stuck and services and then no-one else can come into those services because no one is exiting.

Also, with young people, they do not stay in public housing as long as adults do. Many of them find their feet, take part in education, training and employment and move on. We know that they benefit from that support earlier than many adults do who are chronically homeless, who equally need that support, but we do not get that same throughfare of support.

We need a greater amount of housing. But, if that housing is not then purposefully allocated to young people, and we get by the age discrimination and it enables them to actually have access to that housing, then it will not benefit young people. They will circle in the homelessness sector or in homelessness and become entrenched in the homelessness in the kind of chronic disadvantage. So we need more housing, and we need to purposefully allocate it and support young people to go into it.

Housing First for Young people is a model that allows us to work with complex and high-needs young people who are, by virtue of their age, still able to be supported to move into independence. This a really important thing. Thirty per cent of the chronically homeless young people that we see on the streets of Canberra had their first experience when they were young and we did not adequately support them when they were still at that neuroplasticity and there are opportunities to be able to change those pathways.

We can continue to block up the hole that is the adult homelessness system and work with these people. But we know that those supports do not work as effectively as Housing First for Young People does. It does stop trajectories into adult homelessness.

At the moment, because the amount of funding to homelessness services is quite small, they are unable to work with complex and high-needs clients. That is not entirely true; they are already working with them because they have to, but they do not have the funding that allows them to do it adequately. And, because there are no exit points, they stay in there for a long period of time.

If we had a Housing First for Youth model, we would have a place where these young people with complex needs, who are really struggling due to quite a lot of interconnecting disadvantage, can stay, settle themselves and then move into other options. The great thing about young people is that they change and they are very adaptive, and, when you provide them with these supports, they move on.

Housing First for Youth provides a short-term solution to reduce the number of young

people who are homeless and, similarly, improve their ability to be involved in education, training and employment, but it also has a long-term advantage of reducing the homeless adult population.

MS CLAY: That all makes sense. So is that a house that comes with the programs, with a support person? Is it primarily that pathway—

Dr Barker: It can be, yes. It can be like a Common Ground or a Housing First model, where you build purpose-built facilities that allow people to come in there and have their needs met. In some ways, that is the gold standard, because you need to have those facilities that are safe and able to meet their needs.

There are also a range of models and approaches to practise that can be retrofit to already existing properties. So, with the introduction of the new form model, we may have other services that already exist that could be turned into a Housing First for Youth model.

The gold standard would be to treat this problem with the seriousness that it is and build a purpose-built facility where people who are experiencing homelessness can go there and create it as a hub model so people can also get other needs met too—medical, Centrelink et cetera. It makes it so much more accessible. They all want support but they cannot get access to it. So, if you make it more accessible, they take advantage of it and benefit.

MS CLAY: If the ACT government were to do that well, how much would it cost?

Dr Barker: I would need to take that one on notice—and I will explicitly say that for Mark Parton. We are currently looking at the evidence base and the range of different costs. It might be something that is hard for me to answer because, if you are building it from scratch, that changes depending on the building costs.

MS CLAY: Sure.

Dr Barker: But we can probably look at what the staff ratios are and the kinds of models and how much it cost to look at. I will be at a conference this time next week where I will be talking to some of the experts about how we can get together costing this. Moving forward, it is probably going to be something that we are going to asking for quite explicitly in the budget and the next parliamentary agreement.

MS CLAY: That is great. We recently got on notice that the average cost per public housing dwelling is \$430,000, if that assists you in your analysis. That is the government figure being used.

Dr Barker: Great. Thank you.

MR PETERSSON: You are a big proponent of the WOKE program, which received some funding in this budget. I was wondering if you could talk the committee through what that program is and what uncertainties lie ahead?

Dr Barker: The WOKE program is a dialect called behavioural therapy program that works with young people who are at risk of or are already attempting suicide and self-

harming. It is an evidence-based program that works with the young people and their families. So it creates an environment for support.

Many therapeutic interventions work while you are in therapy and then you leave and they do not work as well afterwards. The WOKE program, builds the capability of the parents and the young person to give them these tools to help them cope, to help them respond better in the community.

It is an evidence-based program—which is a great sign in and of itself—but it has also been evaluated. Not many programs in the ACT have the resources to be evaluated and have not been; so we do not know they are working in these circumstances. We do know that the WOKE program is working in this context.

The other great thing about the WOKE program is that it draws on and builds our workforce. Because it is located at the University of Canberra, it uses psychology students who get placed there, who then learn how to work with some of our most vulnerable and marginalised young people who are self-harming and their parents. That is what we need. We need a greater workforce who, once they leave that program and leave that training, help build the ACT youth mental health sector more broadly. So it has an impact on our workforce too. It is very unique in its contribution to Canberra.

We are very thankful for the extra year of funding. The commonwealth was unable to continue funding it. I do not get to have an influence on the commonwealth government as much as I do in the ACT government. So we begged for some support, and they have found a year of funding. Hopefully, through the Commissioning process, we will see how that can fit in the long term into the ACT mental health landscape.

At this point, we are currently in a youth mental health crisis—and it is getting worse every year. It is really quite heartbreaking to see the impact this is happening and the rates of very severe mental health issues on young people and their inability to get support. So anything in the community that can do early intervention and support families to be able to support their young person needs to be kept. We need to bend over backwards to keep that program and other programs like it, like Stepping Stones, as well.

We cannot be getting rid of any services in the youth mental health service sector. We need to be expanding them and adding more, because we already know there are gaps. We cannot add further ones.

THE CHAIR: Is that realistic, though? Sorry, Michael. Are you—

MR PETTERSSON: So there is funding for one year. When is the next kind of like flash point decision-making time? Is it 12 months from now that we need to be talking about this program needing money, or is six months from now?

Dr Barker: Really, it is six months from now, because there are huge waiting lists for programs like this. We know that they are not of a size that meets the demand being placed on the community. Last I checked, there were around 80 families who were

already attempting suicide and self-harming on the waitlist for this program—and you need to tell them whether they are going to be coming into the program when it starts next. So, for best practice, you need to know soon, for the staff and also the families who are on the waitlist, whether the program is going to be in existence then.

But, to come back to your first question, it is somewhat contingent on how well the commissioning process is done in the mental health sector, because that should be looking at the sector—where the gaps are, what we need to do and how we respond to that.

It is also commonwealth issue, because the commonwealth does not necessarily give us choice as to how money is spent in the ACT. So it does not always meet our needs. It is a bit of knee-jerk policy reaction to do something they think will work everywhere. But that place-based stuff is really important. They need to be able to listen to what is happening in the community and respond to what we see as our needs.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Some of our other witnesses today were a little more pragmatic when it comes to the shortage of mental health professionals Australia wide. You talk about a genuine mental health crisis—and that is obviously something which is affecting people right now and needs assistance right now—but is it genuinely realistic, given the shortage of mental health professionals around Australia, to believe that we can not only maintain but also extend programs in this space, because we just do not have the workforce to do it?

Dr Barker: It is a great question. I think the psychologists and psychiatrists would like to tell that psychologists and psychiatrists have to respond to this problem and we need to build that workforce, and that is true. They are a vital part of doing this. But there are many other supports that we can mobilise in the community to more effectively respond to this need.

Often you may find that the psychologists and psychiatrists might not have a silver bullet for your mental health issue but, if you have a mental health issue, we can provide a range of psychosocial supports to help you in your education, to build your family function and to help address your behaviours so that you minimise the harm to yourself and other people—none of which is done by a psychologist or by a psychiatrist. It is done by youth workers and social workers.

We have evidence-based programs like Functional Family Therapy and multi-systemic therapy that we know are actually more effective at supporting the behavioural needs of a young person and their family than a psychological intervention, which we reify and think, “We need to be doing that.”

Group-work programs like the DBT are very cost effective, with groups of young people together, building their skills to make sure they have their needs met. If we use our funding effectively and actually make a very purposeful use of the existing system, then I think that we can have much better outcomes. It is not completely dependent on psychologists and psychiatrists.

THE CHAIR: That is an exceptional answer. It is a really, really good answer. We will, unfortunately, have to wrap up. I am sorry that we are out of time, Dr Barker. Thanks for attending, Dr Barker. You took a question on notice. Could you please provide to the committee secretariat your answer within five working days of receiving the uncorrected proof transcript?

Dr Barker: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Short suspension.

DWYER, MS LEAH, Director of Policy and Advocacy, YWCA Canberra
TYRREL, MS LAVINIA, Chief Executive Officer, Karinya House

THE CHAIR: We are now joined by Ms Leah Dwyer of the YWCA and Ms Lavinia Tyrrel of Karinya House, and we welcome them to the chamber.

Today's proceedings are being broadcast live. They are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. If you do choose to take a question on notice, it would be handy if you could say emphatically, "I will take that on notice," so everyone is on the same page.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms Dwyer: Yes, I have read the privilege statement and understand it and agree to it.

Ms Tyrrel: I understand the statement and I agree to it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would either of you, or both of you, like to start with an opening statement?

Ms Dwyer: Yes. I believe we have separate opening statements, but I am happy to go first. Thank you for the invitation to appear today, committee members. The YWCA Canberra acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of the land that we gather on, the Ngunnawal people, and pay our respects to elders past, present and future. We also extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who, for thousands of years, have preserved the culture and practice of their communities on country. The YWCA Canberra believes that this land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and will continue to always be Aboriginal land.

We used our budget submission to draw attention to the cost-of-living pressures, the increased demand for our community services and the invaluable role of community services in Canberra. Specifically, we drew attention to our Lanyon Pantry service, which has seen a doubling in clientele over the past 12 months, including people who are in steady employment and who have never needed food relief before.

We raised that some of our early learning services have long wait times and are now fielding calls from increasingly desperate parents as they search out more affordable options. We also discussed how our brokerage fund has been used by parents in our services to meet the basic costs of their children's sporting fees, which we also raised at the previous cost-of-living inquiry as well.

Some of this stress is reflected in responses to our ongoing survey, which reflect the steps people are taking to make ends meet, such as selling items and relying on charities and pay now, buy later schemes. We are also seeing that there is a very strong proportion of people who do not have sufficient savings to cover one rent or mortgage cycle if they were to suddenly lose their employment.

YWCA Canberra broadly welcomed the 2023-24 budget with its emphasis on cost of living, housing affordability and investment in frontline women's services. While the housing package is welcomed, with an increased demand in housing and support services, there is a clear need for more housing across the whole spectrum in the immediate future. Despite these challenges, however, we continue to work with partners in the community sector and in government to secure life-changing housing outcomes for people in affordable rentals, social housing or other supported options.

We also reiterate our long-standing feedback on the Women's Budget Statement. Beyond immediate spending measures, the Women's Budget Statement and its inclusion of sweeping mainstream measures as well as the continued absence of a gendered lens to all appropriation, continues to disappoint. We note that this impression was also reflected in the independent review of the 2023-24 budget.

As we have stated at previous estimates, a thorough Women's Budget Statement would apply a gendered perspective to all spending, as well as policy development and analysis, and is a crucial element to avoid unforeseen consequences on women and other demographic groups. There are several policy initiatives and analysis which we believe would benefit from a gendered lens. We look forward to questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrel?

Ms Tyrrel: Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today. I would also like to extend my respect to the traditional owners on whose land we meet.

Karinya House is a service provider and our mission is simple. We exist to support women who are pregnant or parenting newborn babies in the ACT and have no or limited positive support networks. We have had the privilege of doing this for the last 25 years.

Today I speak on behalf of the powerful women we support every day through our service. The majority of the brave women we support have experienced family and/or domestic violence. They have a history of intergenerational trauma. Most of them earn less than \$900 a fortnight. Most cannot afford private rental or can access affordable social housing programs, and some of them have experienced challenges with drug and alcohol and mental health.

By engaging with Karinya House, these women have demonstrated their commitment to wanting to make change in their lives for themselves and also their babies and children. We know that an early intervention model, such as what Karinya House offers, that works with women during the pre-natal period, has significant positive impacts. It can drastically improve child and maternal health, wellbeing, economic and child protection outcomes and it can reduce the burden on government services later down the line.

We are fortunate to have a strong relationship with government that we have enjoyed over many years. There are a number of announcements in the budget that we welcome, including announcements around increasing public housing stock, expanded homelessness services, some relief for cost of living and also announcements around

funding for domestic and family violence services.

Acknowledging that the budget cannot be everything for everyone, we do also look forward to seeing in future things such as for the specific needs of pregnant and parenting women considered in the design and allocation of public housing stock, a continued decrease in public housing wait times and the design of schemes for women who fall through the cracks between public housing and social housing schemes, and also opportunities to take to scale really fantastic programs, such as midwifery continuity of care and existing pre-natal mental health programs, and making them available to all pregnant women in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Ms Dwyer, I will start with you. Can you talk to me about the family safety levy? There were some lofty outcomes that were alluded to by government, and I would like your reflections on those outcomes.

Ms Dwyer: I am not entirely sure what the outcomes are—unless you are talking about the new and extended funding in the 2023-24 budget. Just for background, the family safety levy was introduced in the 2016-17 budget and it is applied to all ratepayers. It is progressively meant to increase to \$50 a year for ratepayers.

At the release of it, there were some discussions and media announcements around the way that the levy would be used to build the infrastructure and the service model that would make Canberra a best practice city in terms of how we respond to family violence.

Since I have been at YWCA Canberra, which was around 2018 or so, we started to talk about, “This is a significant amount of money. It is actually applied to all ratepayers,” and our initial kind of discussion was around the fact that there needed to be a greater level of transparency around it, because of how the revenue is accrued, and to what extent the delivery of the family safety levy funding was meeting the public expectations of what someone might think the levy is used for. Is it being used largely to enhance frontline services who see women every day, where the demand is increasing on those services exponentially or is it going towards building a bigger government operation in the field?

That has kind of been our messaging for some years now. Beyond that, we also note that we understand that the ACT Audit Office is actually doing an audit of the family safety levy, which is expected in the 2023-24 audit calendar. We are looking forward to that report.

THE CHAIR: When I talked about the “lofty outcomes”, you mentioned them in terms of the way this was sold to us in the early part of the program. I am mindful that we have this audit that is on the way, but are you comfortable in expressing a view on behalf of the YWCA about whether the money that is going to this levy is actually delivering that best practice scenario? Do you think the money is being well spent?

Ms Dwyer: I am not going to answer that question. Good effort, though!

THE CHAIR: I understand, and I gave you an out right at the start.

Ms Dwyer: But I will reiterate that the message of the Y has always been consistent: that there does need to be a level of robust transparency applied to the levy. I do not think that that is a stretch, because it is a levy that is applied to a ratepayer just as other levies are. But I am certainly not going to go down that avenue.

I acknowledge that there was with this 2023-24 budget an increase to new funding of about \$9.5 million or so to frontline services, and the YWCA Canberra are really grateful for that.

MS CLAY: I am glad that you mentioned a gender lens in your opening statement. I was also pretty disappointed in the Pegasus review. It found that:

The ACT Women's Budget Statement contains references to many generic ACT Government programs that have been presented as relevant to women. In terms of new policy announcements, we could only find a few that primarily related to women.

And it then lists Ginninderry Women's Housing, DV services and Netball ACT, which is not very much.

We also had a chat with the Pegasus consultants about the wellbeing indicators and whether those are being applied meaningfully to drive decision-making, on the basis that a gender lens and wellbeing indicator should actually not be a statement at the back end of decisions that you have already made; it should be a decision-making tool applied at the front end that tells you how to spend your money and where to put your priorities. Their take on it was it was not working that way.

Have you seen any improvement in the last three years in terms of prioritisation that show we are getting better at gender lens budget decisions or wellbeing decisions?

Ms Dwyer: I might just focus on the gendered budget, just because it has been something that we have talked about a lot. The short answer is no, really.

This is probably the third estimates that I have sat at where we have talked about gendered budgeting and what we perceive as the ACT government not meeting expectations and certainly not meeting best practice. We provided evidence on notice of best practice gendered budget statements.

So the short answer is no. The Women's Budget Statement that came out in 2023-24 is again just a catch-all document about really great things that are happening that are not necessarily gender specific.

If I think about one thing that stands out to me in the gendered budget space it is that for some time we have been talking about the annual reporting that ACT Policing does. There is a question in there about the perceptions of safety—what is your perception of safety when you are at home, when you are out at night-time et cetera? That information is actually not broken down by gender.

It is provided to the Productivity Commission as part of the ACT government's Report on Government Services. It is an insight into a lot of things in terms of safety

in the community, but there is no gendered analysis of that. That, to us, is a pretty big shortcoming in terms of how we understand safety in the community.

MS CLAY: We have got examples from New Zealand of how to do this well and we have seen examples from the YWCA, and yet we do not seem to be doing it yet. Can you make any suggestions as to what questions or what recommendations might actually lead to gender lens budget decisions rather than a statement at the back end of the decisions that have already been taken?

Ms Dwyer: In an ideal scenario, in the budget itself, every single line of appropriation would be measured against a perceived outcome that could swing one way detrimentally or overly positively towards one gender.

In Canada, for example, they do budget analysis on seniors, veterans, indigenous Canadians, women and young people, and every single line item, even if it is just something that you would not in any way conceive as a gendered measure, would just come out as a neutral measure.

With something like a welfare measure that might be, say, increasing welfare payments or increasing rates or whatever then it is, “How would that actually impact on those groups?” If you want to have women, veterans, pensioners or whatever, every single line item would be assessed.

It sounds like a lot of work, but I feel like that what we see is happening is that because the Office for Women is not embedded into the CMTEED or the Treasury, it is essentially peripheral in CSD, it does not have the bureaucratic clout to pull all of that stuff together and to deliver us a robust Women’s Budget Statement.

MR PETTERSSON: Ms Tyrrel, we are in a cost-of-living crisis that is definitely affecting the most vulnerable the most. I was wondering how demand for your services has changed in recent weeks and months.

Ms Tyrrel: There are two things that we have noticed. In the past 12 to 18 months, we have seen an increase in referrals from women with housing as their primary need, reflecting challenges around the private rental market but also around public housing.

The second thing we have seen is more women returning to our service who had previously been doing amazing things in their lives but are coming under increasing financial stress. We are seeing women returning to us, requesting things like basic baby goods, nappies, wipes et cetera—things that were previously perhaps affordable within their weekly, fortnightly budget—and struggling to make ends meet around making decisions between heating, fuel, food and all the basics that many of us take for granted.

I would say that they are the two biggest changes we have seen in the nature of referrals, given the pressures in the community, and that is alongside the fact that demand for our services remains high.

MR PETTERSSON: We are here to scrutinise the budget of the ACT government. Is there anything you would specifically like to see included in this budget to try and address those issues?

Ms Tyrrel: As I mentioned before, there were a couple of things—one around public housing particularly. This also goes to the question around gender responsive budgeting. Women carry different identities and carry different needs at different points in their lives. What we would love to see, obviously from our perspective, is a much stronger consideration in different budgets measures of the needs of women when they are pregnant and parenting.

Housing is a good example. There are some very fundamental things that a woman who is pregnant or has a small baby needs. Housing needs to be accessible physically. It needs to be affordable. It needs to be safe. It needs to allow a woman to access services, transportation, childcare services and all those sorts of things. That is a sort of specific set of needs that a woman has in her life when she is pregnant and parenting.

Health care of course is another one. We have seen some fantastic results from the continuity of care in midwifery models that exist, but they are not currently available to everyone. I know there are a number of budgetary and other reasons why that is the case. But, from our perspective, seeing the other end of the wonderful positive benefits, having a single midwife accompany you from the prenatal period through to birth and then after birth has significant positive outcomes for a woman and her baby.

They are just two examples where we would like to see that perspective of a woman's needs, particularly around that period of heightened vulnerabilities when you are pregnant and parenting, taken into account whatever the budget measures are—whether it is health, housing and so on.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

MR CAIN: Would you like to give us an update on the YHomes project and how that is progressing?

Ms Dwyer: Sure. The construction commenced a couple of months ago—sometime around April. The expectation is that it will be finished towards the end of the year or at the end of the year, with people moving in in the first quarter of 2024. It is going well.

MR CAIN: Good; after some battles of course.

Ms Dwyer: Yes.

MR CAIN: Do you have plans for other parcels to be similarly developed around Canberra?

Ms Dwyer: Other what, sorry?

MR CAIN: Other parcels to be so developed around Canberra.

Ms Dwyer: The Ainslie parcel of land is the only one that the Y owns. The struggles that we had to make it a reality would be a significant challenge if we were to do it again.

MR CAIN: Obviously the minister just called in powers in June to pull it out of tribunal dispute. Had you lobbied for the minister to use those powers a lot earlier than June last year?

Ms Dwyer: Part of my job is to work for the YWCA Canberra in an advocacy capacity, but I am not entirely sure how this question relates to the 2023-24 budget, though.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned food pantries earlier and, in particular, your operation at Lanyon. Why has life got so much tougher for food pantries in the last 12 months? Why is it more difficult?

Ms Dwyer: In our budget statement, we clarified the scenario around the increased road transport costs—freight levies, fuel excises and all that stuff—which was having a flow-on effect to the pantries who rely on the service. The complication was that the subsidy which the ACT government provides purely to fund the freight levy costs was no longer able to keep pace with the escalation of the freight levy.

THE CHAIR: And obviously combined with increased numbers of people who are accessing the service. You made particular mention of what is going on down in the Lanyon Valley. Are you able to give us a snapshot of who is actually accessing the service there? Are there a lot of new faces?

Ms Dwyer: Yes. We can definitely take it on notice to give you a bit more of a demographic breakdown in terms of age and gender. But, from my experience with the food pantry and the staff there, the traditional client of the service was often a woman who was a pensioner living on a fixed and low income who was living in the immediate area. The pantry has also always been open for a one-off visit, which is an emergency relief, for someone who does not necessarily live in the area and who is not a member of the pantry.

What we are seeing is that there are increasing numbers of working people who may have just recently perhaps lost their job or are actually on a low or modest income and they are needing that once a fortnight food relief. That is common in the food pantry network. Foodbank has done an analysis on that nationally as well.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CLAY: We have had a lot of conversation about the need for more housing, probably more public and community housing and also for more missing middle housing. There was quite a lot of missing middle housing in your submission from the YWCA. We are going through this planning review at the moment, and I am wondering if there are any particular issues or questions that would be useful for us to raise with the planning minister or with our public housing minister later in the week that you do not think have yet been aired that might advance the housing affordability and housing accessibility for Canberrans.

Ms Dwyer: It is in our budget submission that we do support the missing middle. One thing that was not in our budget submission—but we made recommendations to the Productivity Commission on this when the commission did a review of the National Housing Agreement—is that there is a challenge in the ACT in that we are one of the only jurisdictions where the government does not release land parcels on a subsidy to community housing providers. It is obviously a challenge.

In our written response to the Productivity Commission we talked about the fact that there was actually no NHFIC funding that was expended in the ACT, which is unique and possibly a result of the fact that the land parcels are expensive for community housing providers to engage in that model.

Ms Tyrrel: It is fairly simple from our perspective. I know housing is a complex policy issue that requires a federal and territory political response. But, obviously, there is a need for more housing, lower wait times and that, when that housing is allocated, the housing is appropriate to the needs of particularly the women that we support, as I talked about previously, who are pregnant and parenting.

There are some wonderful, affordable housing schemes being developed, including the work from the Y. What we find challenging, as I mentioned previously, is that most of the women we support would be on approximately \$900 a fortnight. So their ability to access affordable housing schemes in the private rental market is very limited.

So we support opportunities where women, particularly, are able to transition if and when they want to through public housing into the level below affordable housing schemes that start giving them access to private tenancies and the rental market.

Ms Dwyer: I would just add to that quickly. We talk about affordable housing as being 75 per cent of market rent, and what is happening is that 75 per cent of market rent is actually no longer affordable to the income bracket that it is designed for. So we would propose looking at ways that that model could be reformed or reviewed so that it actually was more affordable for those people.

It is a really sad situation. Three or so years ago, our community housing model Rentwell—which operates as a 75 per cent model as well—was affordable and now—

THE CHAIR: It is not?

Ms Dwyer: Yes. It is reflected elsewhere that it is actually not affordable anymore.

MS CLAY: It is the gap between 25 per cent of your income and 75 per cent of market rent.

Ms Dwyer: Yes.

MS CLAY: Once upon a time, that gap was probably not so stark.

Ms Tyrrel: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for coming in. We appreciate it. I think you took a question on notice.

Ms Dwyer: I did, yes.

Ms Tyrrel: The pantry.

Ms Dwyer: It will be in the minutes.

THE CHAIR: The deal is: if you have taken questions on notice, it would be appreciated if you could please provide answers to the committee secretary within five working days of receiving the uncorrected proof transcript. That is the suggestion. Thanks for coming in. We appreciate your time.

Ms Dwyer: Okay; thank you.

Ms Tyrrel: Thank you very much.

Short suspension.

ROSENMAN, MS ELENA, Chief Executive Officer, Women’s Legal Centre ACT and Region

THE CHAIR: The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used these words, “I will take that question on notice.” This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm later. Can I remind our witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree to it?

Ms Rosenman: I have read and agree to the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to start with an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

Ms Rosenman: I might just make a brief opening statement. First of all, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that you are meeting on. Would you believe, I am actually joining you from Sherwood Forest in the UK, which seems particularly apt given we are here talking about the budget! There is a beautiful view outside my window. It is also very early in the morning, so apologies if I am a bit slow.

Overall, the centre welcomed a few key initiatives in this year’s budget. In particular, there was a lifeline extended to the centre to ensure that we did not have to cut key services, particularly in our employment and our family violence and family law practices. For us, this is a really important measure to acknowledge, because, actually, it is positive sign of investment in gender equality and the response to violence against women and gender-based violence from portfolios other than the Community Services Directorate, which is where we have got used to seeing a lot of these initiatives coming from. If there is going to be real change around domestic and family violence and gender equality, it is our view that this will only happen when it becomes a responsibility of the whole of government and not just some parts of it.

The second initiative that we also wanted to draw attention to was the expansion of the Health Justice Partnerships. There has been some funding, particularly through the family safety levy, provided to both continue the Health Justice Partnerships that operate in public hospitals and child and family centres across Canberra, and to extend these into, particularly, we are hoping, the child and family centres in West Belconnen and Tuggeranong, which are currently very poorly served by this model, which aims to make specialist legal assistance more accessible within the communities that people live.

I note, overall, where we were disappointed and would like to see some change in future budgets is that in 2022 the ACT government adopted a legal assistance strategy, which is, essentially, a strategy intended to build the availability and accessibility of legal assistance as a core part of resolving social issues. That was a significant process undertaken by the government. All the legal system services in the ACT were consulted in the development of that strategy. It is certainly a very sound strategy that,

I think, has the basis to do both those things—both extend access and availability—but we were disappointed to see that there were not any funds specifically set aside to implement the legal assistance strategy.

I was watching, just before, my colleagues from the YWCA and Karinya House present. They are both organisations we work very closely with in delivering our service, and I reiterate some of those comments about, particularly, the effect of the cost-of-living crisis on women. For us, obviously, what we see is women in either violent relationships or precarious or tenuous employment. As well, there is the need to ensure that the family violence response of the ACT government is undertaken in deep partnership with the sector. That was probably all I wanted to note upfront.

THE CHAIR: We did discuss the family safety levy briefly in the last session, and we are aware that there is an upcoming audit on that. I am just wondering if the Women’s Legal Centre ACT has any position on that—there are a few concerns about where that money is actually being spent and whether it is actually delivering the outcomes that were suggested when it was established.

Ms Rosenman: Yes, certainly we do. We are looking forward to being involved in that report and seeing what the results are. What I would say is that the centre is one of the services that has received a significant investment since, I think, 2019 through the family safety levy to establish the Health Justice Partnerships. This is a program that sees specialist lawyers, essentially, in-posted into teams in mainstream services to build access to specialist legal assistance at a very early stage and to build the mainstream sector response to domestic and family violence.

That program has been funded since 2019 through the family safety levy. As I said, it was certainly very welcomed by both the Women’s Legal Centre and Legal Aid that the funding for that program this year was continued and expanded to, hopefully, include some better geographical coverage. I think it is an excellent example of what can be done when there are additional resources in the system.

It actually is an initiative that has, absolutely, increased the number of women receiving specialist legal assistance as they really start to think through what leaving a relationship might look like and what their rights and options are. It is particularly important, because what we see at the centre is that one of the most effective tools that a perpetrator will use to keep women in a violent relationship is messaging about what will happen to the care of the children and what will happen to the division of property should she leave. So, actually, this is really critical.

The women that we see, particularly through the partnerships, are women that we have not seen before. We see a lot of women who have never received legal advice before, which is really important, and we also see a lot of women, in particular, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities who would not otherwise be coming through the door. So, absolutely, I think that there is some strong practice there.

I also am supportive of building a functioning government. I think we can only get a good response when all parts of the system are equally resourced. I do think it is critical going forward, given how significant the resources generated by the levy are to the sector, that any responses and any expenditure of that is done in deep

partnership with the sector.

I am concerned that we are running into a real sector sustainability and capacity crisis. It is extremely difficult for the sector to employ adequately qualified people on the employment conditions we are able to offer. I think we have even got to the situation now where government is struggling to fill its positions at times, even with the extraordinary difference between the employment conditions in government and in the sector. I think the HJP stands as an example of good practice, but most Canberrans would assume that that family safety levy had absolutely changed things for women on the ground seeking assistance, and I think that is still to be tested.

THE CHAIR: That's good feedback. Thank you.

MS CLAY: I have a question, but if there is something else you would rather tell us, by all means do that.

Ms Rosenman: No.

MS CLAY: As well as funding, there is also training and cultural change. Do you think our courts are getting any better at recognising and dealing with coercive control and the behaviours they see, and are they getting any better at ensuring that children have access to a children's lawyer? There are the things that we know are happening and that we have funded, but is that actually helping once people reach the court system?

Ms Rosenman: I think that is a good question. There are some initiatives coming down the line, particularly from the Commonwealth government, to improve responses or understandings of coercive control within the judiciary. Certainly, what we see is that there is, absolutely, still a need for that. The other thing, obviously, that makes a difference in the judiciary's ability to understand and the legal system's ability to understand and respond to coercive control is women having access to legal assistance that can actually lay out what coercive control is and what it looks like. That is why I think legal assistance services are such a critical part of building the capacity on that issue.

With your permission, I would like to take the question about access to independent children's lawyers on notice, because I think there have been some issues that we have observed in the system about that.

MS CLAY: I would love to see that on notice, thank you.

MR CAIN: What sort of projects would you love to get more into, but you are restrained because of financing or resourcing?

Ms Rosenman: The best example of a project I feel extraordinarily frustrated by is one that has been described consistently as a no brainer. Women's Legal has a partnership with the domestic and family violence crisis service where we impose one of our family lawyers onto that team. That has been an absolute game changer for when we are able to reach women and the services that both us and DVCS are able to provide. It means that when women ring DVCS, they are able to speak to not only

crisis response but also a lawyer. In terms of the potential for avoiding the unnecessary escalation of a woman's legal situation, or particularly supporting her to leave in a way that is safe and sustainable for her and her kids, being able to have access to legal advice at that point is, as I say, a game changer and a no brainer, as it has been described to me.

That project is funded by temporary funding through the national partnership funding. I think it is part of the \$9 million that has been quoted in the Family Safety Hub's budget papers. It is 12 months funding, and it covers the costs of us delivering that service for two days a week. Obviously, we think that service should be a full-time offering that Women's Legal and DVCS are able to provide. We have reached so many women and made such a difference in that particular partnership that it would be a really key area that I would say would be ripe for expansion.

With respect to the other spaces where we would like to see expansion, I refer to some additional funding that would allow us to better connect with communities that are hard to connect to and who are disproportionately affected by the escalation of legal matters—particularly people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. More funding for allied staff within our services would help us to reach legal assistance more deeply into those communities at an earlier point.

THE CHAIR: How much of a crunch or impact does the combination of this massive cost of living crisis and housing crisis have on what you do, in terms of how many people are channelled towards you and the impact that it has on the services that you are expected to provide?

Ms Rosenman: Those factors make the decision for women to leave a relationship that is violent or a job that is exploitative much more difficult. The cost of a family lawyer in the ACT per hour is upwards of \$700 an hour. You can see that, for most women, that very quickly becomes prohibitive. Without legal assistance, we see that one of two things happen. Either women agree to arrangements that are manifestly unfair, they agree to arrangements that are manifestly unsafe for them and their children as part of separation, or they decide not to separate.

During COVID we were preparing for this onslaught or this tsunami of women seeking assistance to separate, after the lockdowns hit. I think we started to see that. Certainly, the Women's Legal Centre has seen, year on year, an increase in the number of women seeking assistance. I also think that there are a large number of women for whom separation is not in any way a feasible reality at the moment, given what it would cost to re-establish themselves and the lack of access they have to both resources and support to do that. I think it is significant and I think it is a big problem culturally for the safety and wellbeing of those women and their children.

THE CHAIR: Thank you; a good answer. I believe you are the only witness in the entire two weeks who is joining us from Sherwood Forest, so thanks for doing so; we appreciate it.

Ms Rosenman: Thanks for having me.

THE CHAIR: I think you took something on notice; I cannot remember what it was.

Ms Rosenman: Independent children's lawyers. I will come back to you on that.

THE CHAIR: That is right. If you could provide answers to the committee secretary within five working days of receiving the uncorrected proof transcript, that would be great.

Ms Rosenman: All right. I am going on leave, you will be pleased to know, after this, so there may be some delay, but I will talk to the secretary about it.

THE CHAIR: All right, thank you. The committee will now suspend for 10 minutes.

Hearing suspended from 4.06 to 4.16 pm.

COX, MS DARLENE, Executive Director, Health Care Consumers Association
ELLISTON, MRS LEANNE, Executive Officer, Nutrition Australia ACT
GOLDMAN, MS MICHELE, Chief Executive Officer, Asthma Australia

THE CHAIR: In this final session today, we will speak with Ms Michele Goldman from Asthma Australia by Webex, Ms Darlene Cox from the Health Care Consumers Association, also by Webex, and we are blessed with the physical presence of Mrs Leanne Elliston from Nutrition Australia ACT. Thanks to everyone for joining us today.

The proceedings are being broadcast live. The proceedings today are also being transcribed and will be published on the Assembly website. If you are taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used the words, “I will take that question on notice,” so that we are all on the same page.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. I ask witnesses to confirm for the record that they understand the implications of the privilege statement and agree to it. We will start with you, Mrs Elliston.

Mrs Elliston: Yes, I understand the privilege statement and agree to it.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. And those joining us on Webex?

Ms Goldman: Yes, I understand and agree; thank you.

Ms Cox: I understand and agree to the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Do you have any opening statements before we proceed to questions?

Ms Goldman: Thank you very much to the committee for inviting Asthma Australia to appear today. There are 2.7 million people in Australia who live with asthma, which is around one in nine people, but in the ACT one in eight people have asthma, so that is higher than the national average. They have symptoms that disrupt daily life or worse, and may experience really frightening asthma attacks that can require urgent hospital visits. Many of you no doubt have family, friends or loved ones who have asthma.

Unfortunately, asthma prevalence in Australia is moving in the wrong direction. In 2022 asthma was the eighth leading contributor to overall disease burden, having risen from 10th place in 2003 and ninth place in 2018. Asthma is a leading cause of disease burden for people aged five to 14 years, which has remained unchanged since 2018. It is a major contributor to disease burden for young people.

Asthma Australia’s 2023-24 pre-budget submission placed an emphasis on air quality, with increasing recognition of the impacts that air quality has in all settings in which people live their lives—their homes, their schools, their workplaces and outdoor spaces—and the impacts that it has on the health of people with asthma due to environmental and climate change impacts.

We also sought a commitment to invest in a one-year ACT refugee community connector pilot program, which is focused on asthma and respiratory care for refugees, connecting them with primary care, with the aim of reducing avoidable hospitalisations.

We are very pleased to advise that the ACT government provided grant funding towards the rollout in the ACT of our AirSmart public education campaign and app to reduce the health impacts of air pollution. We also received grant funds to work with Companion House and four refugee community groups to improve their access to and understanding of health care through culturally capable pharmacists. We commend the budget initiative to continue the Vulnerable Household Energy Support Scheme and funding for research on the health impacts of climate change.

A priority area for Asthma Australia is the health impacts from wood heaters. We congratulate the ACT government on phasing out gas installations in homes and businesses and propose the same mechanism be introduced for wood heaters by requiring any new housing developments or individual houses in the ACT to be free of wood heaters.

An excellent report by the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment investigated the wood heater policy and made a recommendation to ban the installation of new wood heaters in all ACT suburbs, excluding rural areas, for both new and existing builds. That is a recommendation that we support.

Allowing new wood heaters to be installed really hampers the effectiveness and intent of the Wood Heater Replacement Program by continuing the installation of a method of heating that is polluting and inefficient. Decisive action is required to ensure that the ACT community is not being exposed to the ongoing impacts of wood heater pollution and that the ACT government action on emissions is not undermined. That is the end of my opening statement; thank you.

Ms Cox: Health Care Consumers is the peak consumer body in the ACT representing the views and interests of consumers across the entire health system—not only those within the remit of the ACT government but also primary care. I am very happy to take questions.

Mrs Elliston: Thanks so much for inviting me to be part of this committee hearing today. I am the Executive Officer and Senior Dietician of Nutrition Australia ACT. We are a health promotion charity that is committed to promoting the health and wellbeing of the ACT population by inspiring healthy eating, and we aim to be an effective nutrition advocate in preventive health. We are comprised of a pretty small team of accredited practising dieticians with expertise in public health nutrition. We have a proven record of providing a holistic nutrition advisory service that promotes the prevention of lifestyle-related chronic diseases linked to poor nutrition, overweight and obesity.

I would like to highlight that, in the Chief Health Officer's report in 2020, the leading cause of disease burden in the ACT was in fact coronary heart disease. Nutrition and weight obviously are key factors in the prevention of things like coronary heart

disease, amongst other chronic diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and certain cancers.

We see prevention as a really important part and an essential component of the health budget, yet it remains a small blip within the health budget. We would like to commend the ACT government on their ACT preventive health plan. The second half of that plan is currently out for consultation in the community, and we will be providing a submission on that.

In relation to some of the stuff that NA ACT have done in the past with ACT government in the preventive and population health initiatives, over the past 13 years we have worked with ACT government during the research, development and implementation of ACT government and ACT Health policies, specifically the healthy food and drink policies in ACT government workplaces, schools and public health facilities.

A large portion of the work that we have done with the ACT government involves the Fresh Tastes healthy food at school initiative, which was an incredible program that reached 87 per cent of ACT primary schools, representing 42,000 students, and 80 per cent of these schools reported a positive shift in food and drink culture. Our work involved the development of nutrition education resources for schoolteachers to use in the classroom, and the application of the traffic light system in school canteens through the education of canteen managers and undertaking menu assessments to support those school canteens to provide healthier food and drink options for children.

Healthier Choices Canberra is another key initiative of ACT Health that supports the opportunity for Canberrans to make healthier choices at local businesses around Canberra.

Since mid-2022 all government funding associated with those initiatives has actually ceased; so all government funding towards the support that we have provided in those initiatives has ceased. The cessation of support for school canteens and ongoing assessment of menus has affected the sector considerably, with anecdotal information suggesting a decline in healthy choices available for purchase at school canteens, and the resultant increase in the purchase and consumption of unhealthy food and drinks in school settings.

This is of significant concern to us, considering the past 10-plus years that we have worked in the school space to make some significant improvements in those school canteen menus. The ACT Education Directorate has had a policy in place relating to this since 2015. One of the key aspects within that policy states that school canteens are subject to an annual menu review by an external agency to assess the food and drinks provided for sale against the guidelines. That funded opportunity for all public school canteens to do that annual assessment ceased in 2021. The final ones that were delivered were in 2021 or 2020. There has not really been anything further since then, and it is a significant concern that we are seeing a drastic change in that food environment in schools where children are exposed to less healthy choices.

That is one of our key concerns. We have this service called the ACT Nutrition Support Service, which is actually a service that was initially funded for three years by the ACT government through the ACT Health Promotion Grants Program. It

started in 2014. That service evolved. We created a website; we created a Facebook page; there is social media engagement. Post funding, we have continued to operate that service and we have successfully established this service as the face of public health nutrition in the ACT.

The ACT government levered that service, after the cessation of the grant funding, to utilise the support that we could do in the community through the school canteens, Healthier Choices and so on. Currently, there is no funding to support that service. We do have subscribers—currently at 1,500—and we have 3½ thousand Facebook followers.

We currently deliver significant programs in the community that are funded through the grants program. There are two significant grant-funded programs that are currently underway. Under the First 1000 Days program, there is Feeding Healthy Futures, and there is a recently funded children and young person program called “feeding everybody every day”, which targets children that exhibit atypical eating behaviours. That was a key aspect that was brought up in the Auditor-General’s report last year, and that is in collaboration with ACT Health dietitians. That gives you a bit of an idea of what we are up to.

THE CHAIR: That is really good. I certainly learned some things that I did not know. On the basis of your opening statement, is there a belief from Nutrition ACT that the government has dropped the ball somewhat in this space in the last four or five years?

Mrs Elliston: There is a belief, indeed, that the government has certainly dropped the ball. There was significant work undertaken in the past 10 years, particularly with the development of the food and drink policy in schools and the Fresh Tastes program, which showed some fantastic outcomes. Perhaps in the past two years it has slid significantly.

I sit on some national reference groups and networks where, particularly in the school space, ACT was considered the best around the country. Everyone looked up to where ACT was, what we were achieving and the fantastic outcomes we were measuring, particularly in the school canteen space. Sadly, in the past three years, we have dropped significantly. It affects our reputation as well, because we were so significantly involved in that program, we really provided so much engagement and created incredible relationships with all of the school community to support those healthy choices.

THE CHAIR: Yes. It is disappointing that it happens at a time when, as the anecdotal evidence online and out in the field shows, the extreme cost of living crisis is pushing many lower socio-economic households into a less healthy diet. Why does it cost less money to eat crap?

Mrs Elliston: It is the perception that it costs more to eat healthily, or that it is cheaper to eat the garbage food. Let me go back: the more highly processed food, the unhealthy food, tends to be more easily available. It is more accessible; and, yes, it is often quite cheap. If you drive around in your local community, the fast-food outlets are promoting their cheap and nasty meal deals, which are very attractive for families, although not healthy. They can be seen as quite cheap and cost effective compared to

having to go to the supermarket or the farmers market, gather your fruit and vegetables, take them home, prepare them and, hopefully, the children will eat them.

We are up against industry, marketing, availability of and access to those healthy foods. Also, there is the ability to prepare those healthy foods.

THE CHAIR: That is what it gets down to, doesn't it?

Mrs Elliston: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I always had this belief that, in a cost of living crisis, when people could not afford to eat out as much, they would be forced to do things in the kitchen which would be better for them. But it does not always work out that way.

Mrs Elliston: No, because some people who are on low incomes do not have kitchen facilities that are suitable for cooking. They may be limited to just an electric frying pan, or they are not using their gas because it costs so much money. A lot of the work that we do in the community is around educating people around eating well on a budget and simple recipes that are cost effective, that are also healthy and that children are likely to eat. One of the key things that we offer on our website and through our ACT Nutrition Support Service is promoting that messaging in the community.

MS CLAY: I do not know whether you know the value of the programs that government has cut that supported that nutrition education. It strikes me that, in a \$7 billion budget, where we spend a third of it on health, this is probably quite a small spend for preventive health. How much were we spending on those programs that we have now saved?

Mrs Elliston: I cannot tell you the exact figure but you can go back and look at some of those.

MS CLAY: I might ask the health minister; she might know.

Mrs Elliston: You could ask the health minister. Again, it comes back to preventive health. There is obviously a lot of expenditure on tertiary health services where people are in that state of coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, osteoporosis and arthritis. With respect to a lot of these conditions, if they ate well in their early years—a lot of the preventive health focus is focused on children, early years, schools and helping families—and tried to minimise that exposure to unhealthy choices, that would create a shift in the long term and minimise the rates of those chronic diseases, and therefore ease the pressure on the health service that we are seeing now.

MS CLAY: Ms Goldman, I was very pleased that in your submission you put a lot of emphasis on air quality and wood heating. We were also very interested to see the commissioner's recent recommendations that it is time to phase out wood heaters altogether and that the gas phase-out is a good model to look at. It was really pleasing to see that get picked up. Is it your view then that Canberra is probably ready for us to move to the next stage and phase out wood heaters altogether and maybe support that

with really, really good rebates for electric heating replacements?

Ms Goldman: Not only is Canberra ready; I think Canberra is currently leading across the country in terms of the moves that are being taken. Having said that, there is always room for improvement or to accelerate the progress that is being made. For example, there is the ACT Wood Heater Replacement Program, which currently provides a rebate of \$750 for people to remove a wood heater and install electric reverse cycle air conditioning. We believe that the amount should be increased. I think the cost of a reverse cycle air conditioner with a three-star rating starts at around \$500. Installation, depending on how complex it is, can range from between \$600 to \$1,000. So we think at least another \$350 for the installation is needed as a basis to enable people to really take advantage of the program.

With the Home Energy Support Program, we would encourage that to be expanded to include people on low incomes, people with asthma and owners of rental properties. And there are multiple benefits for that, because not only would it create safer home environments for people with asthma but it would also address environmental impacts by expanding the number of households who have cleaner and more efficient forms of heating, cooling and cooking.

MS CLAY: Yes, it would be marvellous. And I liked your targeted approach of low income, asthma sufferers and landlords. If you are moving to a complete phase-out and if you provide rebates for those three groups, you are probably not leaving anyone behind on that. That looked quite sensible to me.

Ms Goldman: We also know from the nationally representative survey that was undertaken—some 25,000 people across Australia, omnibus style—that there is huge community support for phasing out wood heaters. Around about three quarters of the community were supportive of phasing them out in urban or highly built-up areas. So the support is there. The readiness is there. People are motivated, but we know that some people just cannot afford to do so. So those targeted rebates help those people who are ready and who would like to transition to be able to do so.

MS CLAY: That sounds really sensible. I imagine there are huge cost savings in terms of health by doing that. I have certainly spoken to constituents—I suspect all of us have—about people who have literally been hospitalised in their suburb because they cannot breathe the air during winter, and they happen to live in smoke pocket. So there are a lot of good reasons to push ahead and start doing this now, aren't there?

Ms Goldman: Absolutely. I think they estimate the average health costs per wood heater at upwards of \$3,500 per heater. It is not that surprising, when you think about it, because one heater is emitting a large amount of pollution into the community and many people are then breathing in that air. We know from the bushfires that our homes are not resistant to bushfire smoke. Well, smoke from wood heaters is exactly the same. So, when one household in a neighbourhood burns a wood heater, it exposes everyone else living in close vicinity to breathing in that air. And we know that wood heaters are one of the major sources—if not the major source—of small particulate pollution.

MS CLAY: Yes, absolutely. The commissioner's report also found that the Burn

Right Tonight campaigns—the education campaigns that are run to help people use their wood heaters in a better way, so that they are sending out less polluting smoke—are not really very effective. She did not review those as working well. That is why she came down quite strongly on suggesting it is time for a phase-out, more rebates and moving on to the next step. Is that your experience too, from the people who talk to you—that education on how to use a wood heater is not terribly effective?

Ms Goldman: [dropout in sound] the education on its own. Perhaps it has a role to play as part of a multifaceted approach, but, really, the most effective means are incentivising people to transition. The best example of that was in Launceston, where over a three-year period they reduced the number of wood heaters. Three-quarters, I think, or two-thirds of the community had wood heaters. Over a three-year period, they were able to reduce it to a third, and they were able to measure commensurate improvements in air quality as a result, and a corresponding reduction in hospitalisations.

So, to answer your question, I think the most effective mechanisms are really the bans—banning them being installed in new homes and removing them when homes are sold—and providing subsidies to motivate and encourage those people who want to transition to safer, cleaner, cheaper forms of heating or cooling to do so.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Goldman, do you believe that the recommendations of the sustainability commissioner go far enough? I do not know what the experience is in Launceston, but I see the fire pits going out the door at Bunnings left, right and centre. I do not know—will the smoke from wood heaters that are in the house be replaced somewhat by fire pits? Do you believe that there should be some sort of—I do not know what you do there. Do you have concerns about that?

Ms Goldman: We absolutely do. Asthma Australia would be—and is—very supportive of bans on fire pits, and we certainly have played a role with different councils in different jurisdictions who are permitting them. At least a wood heater, for a large part, plays a real role in warming a home. With a fire pit, we cannot equate the joy of toasting marshmallows with the cost of polluting the air and causing people to breathe in harmful pollutants that can not only exacerbate existing disease and cause people to have asthma attacks that require them to be hospitalised but that also contribute towards the development of disease as well. So, absolutely, we would be supportive of a ban on fire pits.

THE CHAIR: Do you have similar concerns about meat smokers, like the charcoal grill meat smokers that are in a lot of back yards, certainly in the Tuggeranong Valley, and, I am sure, right across the city?

Ms Goldman: Certainly in places like the Tuggeranong Valley, where the topography is such that pollutants tend to sit and, depending on the weather conditions, it can be difficult for them to dissipate. With any kind of burning of fuel that contributes to air pollution, we would encourage alternatives to be considered.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: I am going in half blind because I missed the start of the session, which I apologise for. I have a question for the Health Care Consumers' Association. Could you provide the committee with your views on the new north-side hospital and whether that will help with the integration of health services in the ACT.

Ms Cox: Just confirming, are you talking about North Canberra Hospital?

MR PETTERSSON: Yes.

Ms Cox: Or the new north-side hospital to be opened in 2030?

MR PETTERSSON: The new one to be opened in 2030.

Ms Cox: There is a clear need to enhance our public hospital system. The North Canberra Hospital buildings, previously under Calvary, are at end of life. They are old buildings that need to be replaced. So it is actually good news that the government has recognised that we need to build a new hospital to meet the needs of a growing community. Particularly in north Canberra, as the population moves to the north of Canberra, that can then meet consumer needs. There is a clear process to outline or to develop the hospital, think about what we need to have in it, and then phase from the North Canberra Hospital to the new north-side hospital.

The other part of that, though, that we need to think about is: what is the role of enhanced primary care? Not every single person needs to go to hospital. How are we going to support primary care to meet consumer needs so that we are as healthy as we possibly can be, and, also, provide care closer to home and community-based health services, those not only provided by government but also provided by non-government organisations?

We have an opportunity to enhance that at the moment with the new health hubs that the government has announced in this budget. There will be one in south Tuggeranong, in north Gungahlin and in south Canberra. What we would be looking at there is to have flexible spaces so community-based, non-government organisations can be part of an integrated care response to the community. So it could be that CAHMA, Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy, have sessions in the Tuggeranong health hub to provide education and peer support to those people who are accessing drugs in that area. It could be that A Gender Agenda or Meridian have counselling or peer education drop-ins for people. It is care closer to home. The thing about the North Canberra Hospital, and then northside in the longer-term, is it enables us to think about the whole of the system. That is what we are excited about.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: I am going to stay with you, Ms Cox. I know that for some time you guys have been calling out for geriatric streaming in the Emergency Department at the Canberra Hospital. You have noted the experience in Queensland. You have also noted earlier discussions with stakeholders as part of the clinical user groups for the Canberra Hospital expansion project that were certainly indicative that they were

supportive of geriatric streaming. But it stalled somewhat. Does this give you some disappointment?

Ms Cox: We are not sure what the issue is there. It has worked effectively in Queensland. We had longstanding discussions with different healthcare workers across Canberra Health Services about the benefits of it. When an older person turns up to the Emergency Department it is not a friendly environment. It is noisy, the lights are harsh, you are around a lot of sick people and you are often in distress. If you are unwell enough to go to hospital then you really do need a level of care that is required. We want to see people moved quickly through the emergency department and onto the older persons ward so that they can get the care as quickly as possible.

There is evidence that, if you stay in the Emergency Department for more than 12 hours, the likelihood of you experiencing delirium is significantly increased. More than half of the incidences of delirium are preventable. So what are we doing to make sure that older people get the care they need on the older persons ward as quickly as they can and prevent delirium?

Delirium leads to longer lengths of stay, which drives up costs. It can contribute to falls and a level of confusion. If anyone has spent any time with an older relative who has experienced delirium, it really is not a very pleasant thing for them. They experience high levels of distress and confusion and it takes a long time to get over.

THE CHAIR: As we know, healthcare consumers have been advocating for more genuine geriatric streaming. Do you have any sense, based on the Queensland experience—obviously that is a much larger jurisdiction—about what budgetary input would be required to make that happen? Were the discussions advanced to that point?

Ms Cox: No; they were not. It was about a commitment of the geriatricians and nursing staff to that model of care or an interest in exploring that. Sometimes it has talked about with frailty—so recognising frailty in older people and then getting them to the older persons ward.

We have an opportunity. The Emergency Department has not yet opened in the new Canberra Hospital expansion. So we still have an opportunity to review the model of care and to support older people to get the best care possible and prevent unnecessary and adverse harmful impacts like delirium.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CLAY: I have a question for the panel. In some submissions we have got some bits and pieces of recommendations about servicing specific CALD communities and perhaps providing special services for ACT refugees who have recently arrived. I imagine probably a lot of our education and services would need to be tailored for our CALD communities. How are we going? Where are the gaps in the way that we are providing health services to culturally and linguistically diverse Canberrans at the moment? It is probably a question for all three of you, I think.

Mrs Elliston: I am happy to jump in here. That community is often most affected, coming from that nutrition perspective and a public health nutrition perspective. That

cohort of the community are at most risk of less healthy choices and less healthy outcomes in the long term.

We certainly strive to work with organisations that support people from those backgrounds as much as possible and try to co-design some programs that meet their needs and support them at the same time as providing them with the knowledge, skills and confidence around making healthier choices in our community.

There is the Migrant Refugee Settlement Service, which we have a close relationship with, and we work with them to deliver some programs for them. There are also various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that we work with and try to tailor our programs and support as much as possible to suit their needs. It is co-designing and working with them as much as possible.

MS CLAY: Ms Cox?

Ms Cox: We have asked for an increase in funding to support interpreter services across the public health system. It is important because consent to treatment is a fundamental aspect of health care. If people are not aware of the issues, they cannot make an informed decision about consenting to a procedure, operation, medication and the like.

If you do not understand, then how do you manage your medication? How do you manage all of those transitions in care—the discharge home, explaining things to the general practitioner and talking to your community pharmacist? How do you understand what to look for if you deteriorate or if the person you love is deteriorating and what action to take?

There are a whole lot of patient safety implications around not adequately supporting those people from multicultural communities with adequate interpreter services and information in community languages.

When you are stressed, it is really hard to actually engage in a language that is not your first language. These are the things that, as our multicultural community grows, we need to take seriously and do more for. We need to do more than the multicultural festival to support our multicultural communities.

MS CLAY: Thank you. Excellent answer.

Ms Goldman: I would wholeheartedly endorse both of those suggestions. Our experience has been that co-design is a critical element rather than making assumptions or presuming to know what the best approaches might look like. Our best outcomes have come when we have engaged with communities in a really authentic way where we have had members of the community do the research to understand what it is that the issue looks like for people and what the problems are that they need solved versus the problems that we are envisaging.

As an example, in South Australia, through this process, the idea that emerged was a community connector, which is someone like me from my community who gets my local context and who has, in our case, asthma so that there can be a peer I can relate

to but, equally, they understand how to help support me in navigating the health system.

Interpreters are definitely an important part. Being able to engage with people in a culturally appropriate way and in a way that makes them feel safe is really important. That has been really successful. We have worked with a local Country SA PHN there. It was piloted in the mid-north and it has now been expanded to the York Peninsula. That is part of the inspiration around the refugee community connector that we have got in our ACT pre-budget submission.

Having local people from the community charged with engaging with people in language in culturally appropriate ways and in ways that help them feel included and valued and respected, I think, is key.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Cox, we have had a series of discussions today with a number of stakeholders about the scarcity of mental health professionals, not just here in the ACT but right across the nation. Your submission calls for the broadening of the range of and improvement in the access to mental health services in the ACT. I know that you will be well aware of the constraints of that in terms of the personnel.

We had a fascinating discussion earlier on with Justin Barker from the Youth Coalition about his belief that sometimes we get stuck in this mode of saying that it has to be a psychologist or that it has to be a psychiatrist, and that often social workers can fill gaps in that space and sometimes, based on the circumstance and based on the individual, can actually do it better.

What is your view on those challenges with regard to mental health professionals and how we can as a jurisdiction think outside of the box and try and broaden the range of services and improve access to mental health services? I am sorry; that is the longest question in the hearing so far. I hope you can remember even some of it.

Ms Cox: I am very happy to speak to that. I think Justin Barker is completely right. We need to think outside the existing workforce. That is part of what the workforce strategy has been looking at.

We know that peer workers in mental health are highly effective. That is a growing workforce valued by consumers. But we need to make sure that, as the national code for health care workers comes into effect in the ACT, it is very clear what consumers can expect from them and that they, as health workers, understand their obligations to consumers and to meeting what is in the code.

Social workers, similarly, have a very broad skill base. But, in essence, it is about thinking about the person in context as a holistic approach. I think that is the value of peer workers as well. These are people who often have lived experience of mental illness or the challenges of navigating a very fragmented system with the stigma that is involved. That is why they are so valuable—because it is beyond the silo, beyond the channel of care that is provided by psychologist and psychiatrists, and it can look more holistically.

There is always going to be a need for psychiatrists, because there are diagnoses that we need to unlock doors for us, but also there is medication that can help many of us manage the symptoms of our issues.

So, yes, we absolutely have an opportunity to broaden the workforce. What we need to do is have inter-professional learning, so that there is not inter-professional distrust but all of the healthcare workers can work together as a team, recognising that they are there to meet the needs of consumers.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. After 17 sessions on day one of estimates, I think we are done. Thank you. We really appreciate your input, Ms Goldman, Ms Cox and Mrs Elliston.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank the current witnesses and all the other organisations who have appeared throughout the day. I also want to thank the rotating staff. We told everyone that they were the A-team, but we have told that to you as well. Thanks to everyone who has pulled this together.

We will be back to do it all again tomorrow. Thanks team.

The committee adjourned at 4.59 pm.