



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2024-2025

**(Reference: [Inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2024-2025 and
Appropriation \(Office of the Legislative Assembly\) Bill 2024-2025](#))**

Members:

**MS N LAWDER (Chair)
MS S ORR (Deputy Chair)
MISS L NUTTALL**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 22 JULY 2024

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

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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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.

LLOYD, MR JACK, Executive Director and Co-Chief Executive Officer, Belconnen Arts Centre

McINERNEY, MS MONIKA, Artistic Director and Co-Chief Executive Officer, Belconnen Arts Centre

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings of the Select Committee on Estimates inquiry into the Appropriation Bill 2024-2025 and Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2024-2025. The committee will hear today from a range of community organisations.

We wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of the city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. If you are 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 questions taken on notice from the transcript.

First up we will hear from the Belconnen Arts Centre—Ms Monika McInerney, the artistic director and co-CEO, and Jack Lloyd, executive director and co-CEO. Welcome. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is on the pink sheet in front of you. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

Mr Lloyd: I do.

Ms McInerney: I do.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Lloyd: Yes, please. We are here to seek support for ACT artists to access the theatre at Belconnen Arts Centre. The purpose of the Belconnen Arts Centre facility is to provide a venue for arts engagement, to support artists in the development of the arts in Belconnen, to develop audiences for the arts, and to undertake and support community arts activities which provide opportunities for the community to engage in arts and cultural activity.

Belconnen Arts Centre stage 2 was completed in 2020 at a cost to the territory of \$15 million, with its primary feature being a 200 to 400-seat black-box studio theatre space. Two years later, in 2022, the ACT government engaged independent advice from RSM Australia that modelled the necessary operating funding required to activate the facility in line with its purpose and to maintain existing services to the community. Belconnen Arts Centre sought five-year operating funding directly in line with this advice.

The funding subsequently provided by the ACT government is around two-thirds of this amount. While the facility doubled in size, with major increases to operating complexity and costs, our baseline funding increased by 2.5 per cent in real terms. As a result, Belconnen Arts Centre is unable to financially subsidise the theatre's use and it can only be hired by artists on a full cost recovery basis. This is despite RSM Australia's findings that Belco Arts would need to provide financial support to "de-risk the barriers to creating local, high-quality productions" and that "the local market requires additional support to build long-term theatre utilisation".

According to Performing Arts Connections Australia, 80 per cent of Australian performing arts spaces are established with a capacity to invest in program. Contrary to all intentions in developing the space, the theatre at Belconnen Arts Centre is one of the 20 per cent that cannot.

In 2023, we sought further advice from RSM Australia to model this cost of a subsidised program that would allow selected local artists and companies to hire the theatre free of charge. Through a budget consultation submission, we sought annual funding of around \$200,000 for this purpose. This funding was not provided in the 2024-25 ACT budget.

The ACT government is funding the next stage of the Canberra Theatre Centre revitalisation in the 2024-25 budget, which will include "expanding the studio theatre for flexible use by local artists for intimate shows". We are entirely supportive of an expanded Canberra Theatre Centre; however, given the clearly identified need over several decades for a mid-size black-box theatre for ACT artists to present ambitious and engaging work to Canberra audiences, the ACT government should adequately fund the theatre it has recently built at Belconnen Arts Centre, which could start to meet those needs within months and with no further requirement for infrastructure expenditure or duplication of existing facilities.

Our request for around \$200,000 per annum would directly support employment of technicians and event staff. These jobs have been recognised by the ACT government as essential skills to cultivate ahead of a major expansion to Canberra Theatre Centre. This modest funding would ensure artists and arts companies receive the full box office takings from their events, allowing them to present the best possible work, market it to the broadest audience and pay their performers and personnel in line with the ACT government's own principles on remuneration for artists and arts workers.

We respectfully ask that the Select Committee on Estimates recommend that the ACT government invest in the subsidised hire of the theatre at Belconnen Arts Centre for use by local artists and companies. We welcome any questions or comments that you might have.

THE CHAIR: You touched on this in your opening statement: can you confirm how much additional quantum of funding that you believe is necessary to enable you to utilise your entire centre and remunerate people?

Mr Lloyd: To address the issue of artists activating the theatre space, we believe that \$200,000 per annum would provide—

THE CHAIR: In addition to—

Mr Lloyd: In addition to current funding that is received, which would go directly to subsidising the theatre hire costs for local artists.

THE CHAIR: What is your funding like relative to other arts centres?

Mr Lloyd: Relative to other arts centres, we are roughly in line with the Street Theatre and the Tuggeranong Arts Centre. For context, our funding prior to the stage 2 development was, at that same time, still roughly in line with those two arts centres. Effectively, the size of the space has doubled, without an increase in operating costs.

THE CHAIR: Much bigger than Tuggeranong, for example.

Mr Lloyd: Absolutely. What you see therefore is obviously a great disparity in what we are able to provide in terms of support to artists to activate those spaces compared to other similarly funded arts organisations.

THE CHAIR: Have you done any surveying or research about your outreach in the Belconnen area? Is it five per cent of Belconnen residents that access the centre; is it 20 per cent? Do you have any statistics?

Mr Lloyd: We have a very well-established community when it comes to the visual arts program presented in stage 1 and there is very strong community excitement about seeing activity in the theatre. We run surveys after each event that we hold. We have something like 92 out of 100 being our typical response for whether people have had a good time, and the most overwhelming comment that people have is that they want to see us do more stuff; they have a great time at our events and they cannot wait to see more things to enliven the Belconnen town centre.

THE CHAIR: I echo that. I have been to something recently. Well done.

MS ORR: Going back to the funding, you said that you are on par with the other arts centres. Can you explain how your funding works and what funding you get from the ACT government?

Mr Lloyd: Absolutely. We are funded through the arts centre investment funding program, which is a five-year funding round which commenced in 2023, so we are in the middle of the second year of the program at this time. That funding basically enables us to open the space, to provide community services in the arts to the extent we are able to. We are also funded through that amount to outreach to the communities of Gungahlin. It is quite a large geographical region for us to cover out of that funding base.

MS ORR: You mentioned that you have done an assessment of the operating costs and that, as a result, you have asked the government for additional funding for the theatre. Have you done any assessment of other sources of revenue that could support the theatre?

Mr Lloyd: Absolutely. Certainly, in the last few years, we have been quite aggressively increasing our own-source revenue. We are at the point where our spaces for venue hire are reaching capacity and we are limited as to further marginal income that we could expect from those spaces.

We have greatly increased our philanthropic income in recent years. Very happily, with the support of a donation this year, we will be installing a large solar plant on the roof of our building. The commercial activities through our gallery and shop have been invested in and are expanding. We have a café that is slated to open, if financing is achieved, in the next six months. Even with all of those major increases to our revenue base, the reality is that it requires a lot of staff to present live theatre activities in a professional space. The prospects of us making up that gap through trading are unrealistic at this point, before the end of this current period of funding.

MS ORR: If everything is at capacity and it is going quite well, and you have quite a large funding grant for providing community art services, and given that you have these other revenue streams as well, why is that funding grant not enough to provide access to the community arts for which the government grants you money?

Mr Lloyd: Certainly, there is sufficient funding for the space to operate as a hall for hire, and it does operate as a hall for hire. There are a number of organisations who are able to make that work within their financial models. But for the producing companies of the ACT to engage a crew of technicians—front-of-house and back-of-house staff—to present a work, it is something that requires further financial support, either on their side or on ours. Without it, those activities will not happen.

We can demonstrate that, because in the years between 2020 and 2022 we were operating on a higher level of funding, and we did engage with quite a number of the local arts presenting companies in a way that we would like to be able to continue to do; unfortunately, we are not able to. Monika has a list of those organisations.

MISS NUTTALL: Has your funding at least kept pace with the consumer price index?

Mr Lloyd: Over the course of the funding agreement, unfortunately, it has not. We have recently been informed that, while there is a small amount of additional funding for operations included in this year's budget, for which we are grateful, that is against the backdrop of an annual increase in funding of 2.5 per cent, as indexation. Obviously, that is well short of CPI. That puts further pressure on the operating capabilities of Belconnen Arts Centre and, indeed, every other arts organisation. I repeat that the short-term increase to funding is welcome; but, over the course of the funding agreements, no, it does not keep pace with CPI.

MR CAIN: Thank you for outlining your resourcing needs. It is great to have such a centre in the electorate of Ginninderra, which is my electorate. Do you have any ideas on strategy or marketing that could raise the profile of the centre?

Mr Lloyd: We certainly have a very strong marketing presence. Our reach to the community is very strong. The purpose of the theatre itself is to accommodate local artists presenting ambitious creative work which can be the pinnacle of the work that they do. That is the missing piece that we are here to discuss today. Once those activities

are able to proceed, we can provide enormous support in terms of the expertise, the technical support and the marketing. Finding a way for those activities to proceed that is financially viable for those arts organisations is the challenge.

THE CHAIR: We will wrap up there. Thank you very much for your time and your attendance today. I do not think you have taken any questions on notice. If you have, please provide your answers to the committee secretariat within three business days. Thanks again for appearing today.

HENNESSY, DR BIANCA, Research and Policy Officer, Australian Education Union
BURROUGHS, MS ANGELA, Branch President, Australian Education Union

THE CHAIR: Next up, we welcome the Australian Education Union: Ms Angela Burroughs, Branch President, and Dr Bianca Hennessy, Research and Policy Officer. Welcome to this public hearing of the Select Committee on Estimates for its inquiry into the Appropriation Bill 2024-2025 and the Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2024-2025. We are hearing from a broad range of community organisations today, such as yours.

We wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would like to welcome and acknowledge any other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today.

The proceedings today are being recorded, transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. If you take a question on notice, it would be useful if you stated: "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

I would like to remind you, as witnesses, of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, the pink sheet in front of you. Please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it.

Dr Hennessy: I understand and agree with the statement.

Ms Burroughs: I do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms Burroughs: I would; thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today. The Australian Education Union acknowledges the government's efforts in a challenging fiscal environment; however, we must emphasise that this budget falls short in several critical areas.

Education is not just a line item; it is an investment in the ACT's future. Our analysis of the budget identified significant gaps that must be addressed to ensure the quality of public education that our community deserves. Our budget submission, based on extensive consultation with educators, highlighted three key areas: staffing, infrastructure, and literacy and numeracy support. These are crucial for maintaining and improving the quality of public education in the ACT.

The budget falls short in addressing the teacher shortage crisis, supporting CIT educators, and providing comprehensive literacy and numeracy support. We are concerned about the lack of attraction and retention measures for teachers and the absence of a centralised curriculum support unit. We also note the lack of attention paid to school and CIT infrastructure.

The AEU stand firm in our commitment to equity and excellence in our public education system. We cannot be complacent about our good position relative to other states. Every public education student and educator in the ACT deserves better than good. They deserve great. We hope this review will lead to further consideration of education funding priorities. The ACT government has always affirmed its commitment to education. Now is the time to match that commitment with the resources that our educators and students need to thrive. Thank you. We look forward to discussing these items with you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. The Education Directorate's 2022-23 annual report talked about reported incidents of violence in schools as the most significant risk to the health and safety of workers in ACT public schools. That is occupational violence in the form of verbal abuse or aggression by students or parents. In the 2022-23 reporting period there were 7,448 work incident reports submitted in relation to occupational violence, which was an increase of nearly 2,000 from the previous reporting period. I note that the AEU is working with the government, and you have provided a 10-point action plan on the issue of school violence. Can you talk about the government's response to your 10-point plan, and are you satisfied with the progress so far?

Dr Hennessy: Sure. Thank you for picking up on such an important issue. When we submitted that 10-point plan for school safety to the government, Minister Berry responded very quickly, agreeing with all of our recommendations. So we have support from the government that this is an issue that we need to dedicate resources to and that members of the AEU need to be listened to on what the solutions are.

Violence in schools is result of many of the issues that we talked about in our budget submission. Understaffing schools means that schools are not safe. If there are not enough adults in a school it cannot be safe for everybody. If people are fatigued, if people are stressed, it is not a safe workplace.

We need to see safe systems of work and a deep engagement with the WHS Act, which means holistic risk assessments at every site to make sure that everyone can participate in designing and implementing those safe systems. We are working with the Education Directorate to review the occupational violence policy and procedure. It is a work in progress. We are really looking forward to, hopefully, seeing a real sense of reform in that space, because the status quo simply is not good enough.

THE CHAIR: Has it progressed at a pace that you are satisfied with?

Dr Hennessy: Any injury is one too many. We will never be satisfied with the pace of work on this because our colleagues sit in our office every day talking to people who have been injured at work. Every single person who has been hurt at their work is one person too many, so we are eager to progress that work as quickly as we can.

THE CHAIR: Are you concerned that the number of reported incidents continues to climb?

Dr Hennessy: We are certainly concerned by that. We do not want to, however, diminish the good work of reporting. A reporting culture is a good thing. We know that,

because of our union's efforts, we have implemented a system of reporting risk that has spread across the ACTPS. The government has cooperated with us in really encouraging everyone in schools to report anything that they see. Reported risk and reported incidents are not necessarily a bad thing, but we need to make sure that we take that data and use it for good. We take a few steps back and we say, "What is causing these issues and what can be put in place to prevent them from happening in the first place?"

MISS NUTTALL: Do you think that right now the directorate is resourced adequately to follow up on reports of occupational violence within schools?

Dr Hennessy: No. I think we need additional funding to do that. The erosion of social services in our community means that schools are often the place of last resort. When a family is experiencing difficulty or when a child has needs that are not being met, it is our teachers who bear the brunt of that.

MS ORR: Going back to Ms Burroughs's opening statement, there were a few things there that you outlined, in addition to the funding that was in the budget, that you would like to see in the future. As you know, budgeting is all about prioritisation. Which one would you prioritise, in circumstances where you could not have everything all at once? Where would you like to see a bit more traction and a bit more probing?

Ms Burroughs: Because they are interrelated issues, the priority that I see is making sure that the literacy and numeracy review is properly implemented, because that will change outcomes for students. It will also have a significant impact on teacher workload. So that has to be a priority and it has to be properly resourced. I have said previously that this has the potential to be a game changer for ACT public education if properly resourced.

I am significantly concerned that the budget papers have not properly resourced the implementation of Strong Foundations. They are dependent on us winning substantial funding through the commonwealth. We wait patiently for that, but it is a risk. Our members are really welcoming of this initiative and we cannot let them down. We have to see this work. It has to transform public education in the ACT.

MS ORR: When you said you are waiting on commonwealth funding, is there a risk that the commonwealth funding will not come through? If it does, does that take away a lot of the concern that you have got with the funding at the moment?

Ms Burroughs: Not entirely. We are stuck in this bind while we are waiting for the next school resourcing standard agreement to be entered into. I might have got that name wrong. Anyway, we will fix that up later.

The real concern is that that initiative requires people—and they cannot just be any people. They have to be experienced educators. What we do know is that there are not enough of them. The real concern is that people may be moved from existing positions. We have been told that none will come from school. That is great, but that means that they are coming from somewhere. So what services are not going to be prioritised because people are being moved to support the implementation of the literacy and numeracy review?

MS ORR: So it is really about deeper clarification as to how the program is going to be implemented and working through any concerns that might come from that. Is that a fair assessment?

Ms Burroughs: It is. It is also fair to say that there is an undertaking for our involvement in that planning between now and the end of the year, because the implementation does not commence until 2025. We would expect to be significantly involved, and have been told we will be significantly involved, in that planning over the next five to six months.

MS ORR: I have some more questions, but, conscious of time, I will pass to Miss Nuttall. Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: If Strong Foundations is not resourced well, does that have the potential to intensify the workforce shortage and teacher workload issues that we are currently seeing?

Ms Burroughs: Yes.

MISS NUTTALL: You recommended that the budget include targeted findings and the teacher shortage crisis. Has it been made clear to you what expenditure in the budget does go directly towards reducing teachers' workloads and promoting teacher retention? Where could we see more money for those specific initiatives?

Ms Burroughs: It is difficult to identify that in that level of detail from the budget. We do know that there are programs in place to try and reduce workload, such as the Sustainable Workload Management Committee and its endeavours. Our significant concern is the understaffing, and sustained understaffing, of the system.

MISS NUTTALL: Is it just sheer underfunding or are there places where we could be using resources more efficiently within the budget to better support teachers with our local ED?

Ms Burroughs: Yes; absolutely. As the literacy and numeracy review identified, there are a whole lot of inconsistent practices across the ACT system, so increasing consistency would help. The other main thing is taking away from our education leaders, our principals in particular, the non-educational work that they do. They should not be involved in tree audits and car park maintenance, for instance. They want to be instructional leaders and we should give them the time, space and resources to be instructional leaders.

MISS NUTTALL: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for appearing today. If you have taken any questions on notice, or perhaps want to clarify that name, please let us know as soon as possible. You have three days, maximum, to advise the committee secretariat. Thank you again for appearing.

Ms Burroughs: Thank you.

Dr Hennessy: Thank you so much.

VERMAAK, MS YOLANDI, President, Wombat Rescue

THE CHAIR: We welcome Ms Yolandi Vermaak, President of Wombat Rescue. I would like to remind the witness of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is the pink sheet on the table in front of you. If you can confirm that you understand the statement and agree to comply with it?

Ms Vermaak: I do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms Vermaak: I do, thank you. Thank you so much for the opportunity to talk to you today. Wombat Rescue was established in 2018 and registered as a not-for-profit incorporated association in 2019. In 2022, we became fully licensed to care, rehabilitate and release wombats in the ACT.

Wombat Rescue started as a road rescue initiative, but today is a fully-fledged licensed wildlife group that has considerable experience in managing bare-nosed wombats, implementing large-scale population treatment programs to eradicate mange, lobbying for change and managing the ACT government wombat sightings portal. We are a founding member of the ACT wombat stakeholder working group. Today we are differentiated as the leading wombat group in the region. We provide specialist advice, care, training and education to stakeholders such as other wildlife groups, councils, government departments, rangers, urban developers and collaborative parties like ecologist organisations.

So how do our operations work? I live in a three-bedroom house on a 400-square block. At any given time I can have up to eight wombats in my home at different ages and with different requirements. A team of volunteers come into my home regularly to help feed the young ones and help clean the bigger wombats. The smallest wombat I have in care is 600 grams. I get up twice during the night to feed her. With critically ill wombats I may get up by the hour to provide medicine and care.

All these animals, when they have grown and when they are healthy, need to move to larger enclosures and this requires us to have capacity. We are asked by groups, such as ACT Wildlife, Wildcare, NARG, WIRES and as far away as South Coast Animal Rescue, to take in these critically ill adults or challenging cases because we have the skill and expertise to deal with them.

Wombat Rescue is primarily funded by donations. We received a small amount of funding from the ACT government in 2022, which was \$10,000, but this was redirected from other funding. We have recently also received a grant this year for \$24,000 for mange treatment. Although we are grateful for this, it is a fraction of what we spend on mange treatment and our operations.

Across most states, but very much so in the ACT, wombats are in trouble. They face urban development where their homes are destroyed and where they are either killed in the process or, if they survive, are forced to move into occupied territory, which causes a raft of problems. They face increasing car strikes as our population grows and their

habitat dwindles. They face dog attacks as more people use recreational space shared with wildlife and do not have their dogs on a leash. They face mange, the biggest threat of all. This is an animal welfare crisis.

All of these issues that wombats face in our city are causing an increase in the calls we receive and the number of wombats we have to deal with on a daily basis, as well as our overall workload. To give you some context of the scope of our operations, there are two ways in which we have contact with mange treatment and with wombats. First of all, wombats we do not see but know they are there in mange affected areas. In these areas we normally do a population treatment program where we treat hundreds of burrows at the specific set period of 15 weeks. We are currently doing such a program and population treatment at Point Hut West. We are covering 150 burrows and targeting approximately 50 to 60 wombats. On top of this, we then have individual wombats, reported by members of the public. Each wombat has a name and a photo, and we are able to track them individually, whether that is to rescue, euthanize, bring into care or to treat them for mange.

From the beginning of this year, 2024, to the end of June, we have brought into care 19 wombats. We have rescued four wombats. We have released five wombats. We treated 58 individual wombats for mange in the field. This is 86 individual wombats over six months that each required a high level of interaction, resources, intervention and forward planning, such as carers, skills, resources, costs, vet assistance and enclosure requirements. Furthermore, since the inception of the ACT mange portal in 2021 it has had 528 records. Wombat Rescue manages the vast majority of these. This is an extraordinary amount of service we deliver to our community.

The ACT government has made available land to other animal groups in the ACT, such as ACT Rescue and Foster, or ARF, and two individual sites for ACT Wildlife and possibly more. What we are asking is to be afforded the same opportunity to expand and have land available to us, to enable our operations to be in line with other animal groups in the ACT. With the help of our government, there are three main issues that we ask assistance with.

One, is land. This can be divided into two parts, urban and rural. Urban is a high priority for us so that we have a block available where we can build enclosures and expand our capacity to care for wombats, and where we can conduct our operations from. Rural land is a long-term goal and wish: where we can have a large piece of rural land available to establish a sanctuary; for the safe release of wombats in care; and a possible relocation site for wombats affected by urban development.

Number two is recurring funding for mange treatment. The Victorian government has committed \$400,000 for mange in 2021 and they have provided \$100,000 each year, over four years. The New South Wales government has committed \$2.5 million for mange treatment in 2023. We have only received \$35,000 from the government. This was in the form of a grant and not recurrent funding, and we have been doing mange treatment since 2018. We would like to ask the ACT government to commit to recurrent funding as this is a shared concern for wombats in our midst. The problem of mange is big, and it cannot be addressed by volunteers and donations only.

Number three is a wildlife vet. I know this has been lobbied for already but I would like

to reiterate that need again. Wombats have died in our care because we could not get them to a vet in time; we could not find a vet confident enough to help with wildlife; or we were downright refused services. The need for a dedicated wildlife vet as a shared resource between all wildlife groups in the ACT is now.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. In a way, my first question would be, why you did not bring a wombat with you? But that aside—

Ms Vermaak: A distraction.

THE CHAIR: Just joking. Could you talk to us a little more about what recurrent funding from the ACT government would enable you to do? Do you have the administrative resources to scale-up if that were to occur?

Ms Vermaak: That is a very good question. We have worked with the ACT government in terms of permits and how to do treatments. Obviously we cannot just do an unlimited amount of treatment on the Murrumbidgee and the Molonglo Rivers, basically where mange is most prevalent, because of years of contamination and chemicals into the waterway. So what we have agreed on is a six-kilometre leeway per year. That is a very long stretch. We do a one kilometre stretch at a time because volunteers obviously cannot be doing six hours of treatment. So, we have come to a really good model where we do one kilometre at a time, and it costs us roughly \$10,000 per kilometre. One kilometre can have up to 200-250 burrows, which are treated once a week for 15 weeks. That includes medication, the hardware, the cameras—all the things that we need to do this program. If we do six kilometres in a year, that would be \$60,000.

MS ORR: Can you clarify for me: are you the only group doing mange treatment or are there other programs in the ACT that you also work with?

Ms Vermaak: We are the primary group doing mange treatment. I know ACT Wildlife has had programs in the past, but they are not doing any treatment programs at the moment. We sort of work independently from each other.

MISS NUTTALL: When it comes to the wildlife vet, could you walk us a bit more through the expected capacity? How many wombats do you think would benefit from a wildlife vet service that are in your care currently? Do you think you would be able to scale up if you could refer them through?

Ms Vermaak: This would be a shared resource for all other groups, so it would include all species of wildlife, but specifically wombats. As I said, we took 19 wombats into care over six months, and then we also have transfers from other groups. We have smaller wombats; we have really sick adults that come into care; and we have mangy wombats that come into care. So, there is quite a lot. Just a ballpark average, I would say three or four wombats per month do need vet assistance. For us, it is a problem. There are vets out there, but they are bound by their practice rules so they give preference to paying clients. If we get an appointment, we have to pay. So, it is either a very costly experience or it is free, but you have to wait six hours.

THE CHAIR: Apart from funding, which is a huge challenge, what other challenges do you face with your organisation?

Ms Vermaak: Capacity is our biggest issue. We need to progress wombats through a series of enclosure sizes. If I have a very sick wombat, I have an ICU custom-built at home, which does not require a lot of space because these adults are critically ill so they do not need to move around. As they get better, they need to move to a small enclosure, then they get a bigger enclosure, then pre-release and then we release them. We are very limited in having this progression of enclosure sizes, which is why having a piece of urban land would be fantastic, so we can custom-build at least four or five enclosures.

MISS NUTTALL: In terms of capacity, would you say that you currently have volunteers who would be able to or willing to scale up their operation? Is it that your volunteers constricted by the existing space, or would capacity include perhaps attracting more volunteers?

Ms Vermaak: We have around 60 volunteers. Of them, really active volunteers number about 20. There is definitely scope for volunteers to become more involved. The problem is a lot of volunteers are willing to do the ICU setup I have because it does not take a lot of space, but if I have six volunteers with six ICUs, it will require six enclosures four months down the track. So, I need the enclosures to be able to scale up the volunteers to do that service.

MISS NUTTALL: Absolutely, that makes sense.

THE CHAIR: That is time for us. I would like to thank you for your attendance today and for answering our questions very much. I do not think you have taken any questions on notice?

Ms Vermaak: No.

THE CHAIR: If you have a brilliant thought you want to provide to the secretariat later, it should be within three working days. So, thank you again for your attendance today and also for all the work you do.

Ms Vermaak: Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

Short suspension.

ROSENMAN, MS ELENA, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Legal Centre

THE CHAIR: We now welcome Ms Elena Rosenman, CEO of the Women's Legal Centre. I would like to remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is the pink sheet on the desk. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

Ms Rosenman: I understand and agree to comply.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms Rosenman: Yes, thank you; I would. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on here today. I am certainly very grateful for their ongoing stewardship of our community.

For people who are new or I have not met before, I just want to really briefly explain about Women's Legal. We are the only gender-specific legal assistance service here in the ACT, dedicated to ensuring that women are safe, strong and in control of their own lives. We assist women with a broad range of issues here in Canberra. We assist them with family and relationship breakdown, most often in the context of domestic and family violence; issues at work; discrimination; sexual harassment; and migration and problems with visas, particularly when that intersects with domestic and family violence. As well, we are one of the only three independent legal services for people affected by sexual. We also have within the centre a specialist program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, called Mulleun Mura. That is a program that is provided and led by Aboriginal women working with us at the centre.

Last year, we assisted over 1,600 women and over 2,000 accompanying children. Our organisation works in deep partnership with a lot of mainstream organisations here in Canberra to ensure access. That includes the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, child and family centres across Canberra, victims of crime, CIT and UnionsACT.

In response to the ACT budget this year, we certainly welcomed what we saw as a modest investment in legal assistance services across the board. The funding that was announced included funding of \$410,000 to the centre to support the work of the Mulleun Mura program, the Aboriginal women's program. This program has been grossly underfunded for many years, which is an issue that we have been trying to get rectified for a long time, which means that the bulk of the \$410,000 was actually used to cover the costs of the existing program.

The additional money also will allow us to add an additional lawyer position into the program, which we are currently recruiting. This position will increase access particularly to services in relation to care and protection. What we see as the outcomes, I guess, of that service is that First Nations families will have more control over the care arrangements of their children; that care arrangements will prioritise kinship and cultural connections; and, ideally, that we are reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care and protection. All of those outcomes, I think we can agree, are essential to the ACT's delivery of the Closing the Gap targets.

We were told that the key ambition of this budget was to deliver for a growing city. From what we see at this centre, investment in social services has not kept pace with population growth and growth in need in our community. The investment in these services to run core operations is not adequate to ensure that Canberrans can reliably access basic support at a time of crisis or in fact to avoid a crisis. This is particularly the case for women and their children who are affected by domestic and family violence, gender-based discrimination and sexual violence.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. You said that last year you assisted more than 1,600 women in the ACT. Do you know how many sexual assault and harassment matters there were and how many of them proceeded to legal action?

Ms Rosenman: I do not have the exact numbers with me, but I can certainly provide them on notice. What is interesting is that we are funded specifically to support women who are affected by sexual harassment at work. What we find is that it is quite difficult to reach those women. Whereas women who are affected by other forms of gender-based violence, particularly domestic and family violence, are often engaged with a range of community services that ensure a really clear referral pathway, a lot of women who are having problems at work do not have the same level of community services engagement. We have found that, while there has been a steady interest in women taking action in relation to sexual harassment, it would not be at the number that we think is indicative of the problem in the ACT.

One of the things that we certainly noticed at the centre was that, throughout 2021, there was a really significant, visible increase in the number of women seeking assistance both in relation to sexual violence and to sexual harassment at work. We put that down to the effect of the very public conversation that was caused by the appointment of Grace Tame as Australian of the Year and the disclosure of Brittany Higgins and her experience at work. Unfortunately, in a corresponding way, what we also saw was a massive drop-off in requests for assistance when the very high-profile trial here in Canberra was abandoned.

We certainly provide assistance in relation to sexual harassment. The service that you can get from the Women's Legal Centre is quite unique. But there is absolutely work to do to make sure that women are both aware of the service but also willing to take action. Many of the women that come to us for assistance in relation to sexual harassment only come to us at the point when they have already left the job, and the reason that come is usually because they are very motivated to avoid the situation happening for someone else. We are still yet to reach women at a point in their experience where we could take some action within the workplace and keep them connected to work. We have just received commonwealth funding to establish the ACT Working Women's Centre, and we are doing that in conjunction with UnionsACT. We are hopeful that, once that gets going in the next few months, that will create a much better avenue into that element of our service.

THE CHAIR: Can you just touch briefly—a big ask, I know—on some of the reasons why there is such a disconnect with respect to sexual assault and harassment between actual occurrence, seeking advice and proceeding to legal proceedings?

Ms Rosenman: There are two issues. In relation to actually reaching out and seeking

support, there are two issues. One is that, in many cases, women are not sure that what has happened to them actually is within the definition of sexual violence or sexual harassment. A second issue that precludes them contacting us, I think, is a lack of trust in the criminal justice system and civil justice system to deliver any sort of relief to their situation.

MS ORR: Just picking up on that, I am interested to know if there is any evidence that suggests why people will not necessarily be coming forward? I know it has been put forward by some people that there is just a cultural change that needs to happen and that what we are seeing in the increased reporting numbers is that people are feeling more open to taking avenues that are available. But, from what you have just said, there is still a long way to go before we have fully realised, I guess, the proper working of that system.

Ms Rosenman: I think all conversations about these issues help. But, as I have said in relation to seeing the drop-off, sometimes the effect can go the other way. I think the thing that will assist women building confidence in the system to respond to them will be being able to see more experiences of where the justice system has actually delivered some kind of remedy.

MR CAIN: Do you think there are any real ways to increase the access to justice and facilitate justice in this space?

Ms Rosenman: One of the biggest issues and one of the primary concerns—and I think this would be shared across all of my colleagues working in the legal assistance sector—is how extraordinarily precarious the funding for legal assistance is. In reality, the short answer to your question is: yes, there is an enormous amount of action that could be done, but all of them require resourcing, particularly resourcing—and I think this is one of the challenges in the legal assistance space—not just to lawyers but also to all the complementary skillsets and professions that are actually required to make sure these services are in the right places, can reach women, can speak to them and explain the legal system in ways that they understand. All of that infrastructure is extremely poorly resourced by both the ACT and commonwealth government investment in legal assistance.

MS ORR: Just picking up on that, I think you said in your opening remarks you talked about community sector funding. As a community legal service, are you taking yourself to be part of that community sector?

Ms Rosenman: Yes, of course.

MS ORR: You also made some comments about the complementary services. As I said in one of the previous sessions, budgeting is all about prioritisation and there are not infinite funds. Can I get an understanding from you of where you would see the funding that is available best directed to responding to the needs that are there?

Ms Rosenman: The first thing I would say about budgeting being about prioritisation is that, when you are in a funding relationship with government, you are not always entirely in control of the priorities. So funding agreements will often set restrictions or particularly expectations around funding that absolutely minimise your ability to direct

that funding towards where you think it should best go to deliver access to justice, in our case. One of the issues that we have is that funding for the Women's Legal Centre has never been in a more precarious state than it is now. We have less than 12 months security on more than 60 per cent of our funding, and that includes over \$1 million of ACT government funding.

MS ORR: Okay; so the ACT is a component of that?

Ms Rosenman: Yes. Legal assistance is funded by both commonwealth and ACT governments. I would say that the commonwealth government investment, particularly in services for women, is much higher than the ACT investment.

MS ORR: When you say you are in a precarious position, is that because funding agreements are coming to an end and new ones are being negotiated? Just walk me through what is going on in this particular circumstance.

Ms Rosenman: The issue for us is that the National Legal Assistance Partnership, which is the instrument through which funding is delivered to legal assistance services, expires on 30 June 2025. That means that all of our core funding arrangements are scheduled to expire. We also have a situation in relation to our ACT funding that a lot of that funding is very short term. The funding that I just described that we welcomed particularly for our Aboriginal women's program was only for 12 months. So you can understand the pressure that that places on service continuity.

The issue is that that instrument, which is an agreement between Attorneys-General, is currently being renegotiated. We are expecting to see a new agreement before June 2025. What I am looking for as a commitment from all sides of the ACT government is an investment in legal assistance arrangements, and our contribution—the ACT's contribution—that actually recognises the extraordinary growth in our population over recent years and recognises the increasing complexity for the women that we assist. That includes the level and risk of violence that they are experiencing but also the complexity in the systems that surround them and the paucity of support in all other areas of community services.

We are also, obviously, looking for long-term funding arrangements. We have had arrangements with the ACT government to deliver core services for as short as three months in the last few years. It is not possible to run a sustainable, healthy, thriving service that is there for Canberrans with the arrangements being as patchy and unreliable as they currently are.

MS ORR: Is the Women's Legal Centre at all involved with the work that ACTCOSS is doing with the Community Services Directorate around the ongoing funding of the community services sector?

Ms Rosenman: We have been involved in that, yes.

MISS NUTTALL: This is fairly specific, but I am interested in learning more about how the Women's Legal Centre will be using the resources from the Confiscated Assets Trust fund that the Attorney-General announced was allocated to your service last week. Would you be able to talk us through your plans?

Ms Rosenman: Yes. What I thought was good about the Confiscated Assets Trust fund allocation was that they went somewhere in recognising that funding lawyers is certainly not adequate in terms of delivering access to the justice system for Canberrans. What we will be using those funds to do is to develop a handbook for people affected by sexual violence specifically and to try to go some way in doing some of the things that other members have discussed around building confidence in the system—so actually explaining to people what they can expect when they engage with different systems in responding to sexual violence and particularly what their rights and entitlements in those systems are, which I think people are not always clear on, and, most importantly, connecting them to services that will help them take those next steps.

What I think is important about having a resource like that is it is something that people can access privately in their own time, when they are ready, at 4 am, and can give them really clear, reliable advice. I think that is particularly important because otherwise what happens is—and a lot of your comments have touched on this—people are subject to the conversation that is happening around them. Sometimes that can be really well informed and well-intentioned and still act to dissuade women from taking steps to make formal reports in relation to sexual violence.

MR CAIN: There was a rather distressing summary given in the ACT Policing submission to the recent JACS inquiry into administration of bail, where an accused had breached a DVO, breached bail, given bail and then murdered their partner just a couple of years ago. Do you think this sort of horrendous outcome supports the introduction of a separate offence for breach of bail, particularly where there is domestic violence or family violence related charges?

Ms Rosenman: I think it is possible and it is worth exploring. But my substantive comment to that is that the situation we find ourselves in in relation to safety is demonstrative of a system that is over-stretched and under-resourced. I think reaching for legislative responses in the first instance and not actually resourcing properly the services that are designed to respond to exactly these kinds of risks is a short-term solution that will not actually see substantive long-term sustained change. I think that we have to look at legislative reform but, overall, from what we are seeing day to day, my priority at this point would be to resource the services that are designed to try and ameliorate all of these risks.

MR CAIN: Just assuming that we are in a world where a legislative change was supported, resource wise, which obviously does not always happen, do you think there is an important case for this standalone offence for breach of bail or at least in circumstances of certain charges and certain backgrounds?

Ms Rosenman: I certainly think that, if there were a discussion and a process to consider that, we would be very happy to be part of it and to share the experiences of the women that we work with as well as the sector that we are part of. We work very closely with DVCS. I think making sure that all of those voices are able to be heard in that process is really important.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

MS ORR: Ms Rosenman, just picking up on that, what I took from our answer is that, while you were not necessarily discounting the possibility of exploring or discussing further the proposition, that there are many considerations to take into account and that perhaps that might not be the place we should be putting all of our focus. Is that correct?

Ms Rosenman: That is right. We need to look at law reform and we need to resource the system. Being pushed to do one or the other exclusively serves no-one.

MS ORR: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: There is a short period left. I just wanted to ask a little bit about the minimum age of criminal responsibility. Do you have a view on the recent amendment to the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12 years and the upcoming increase to 14 years, and the impact this may have on women and girls in the ACT?

Ms Rosenman: It is actually not a space that we have considered. Certainly we are very supportive of actions that can be taken to reduce, particularly, the number of First Nation's people in the criminal justice system, and particularly the avenue between engagement and care and protection and the criminal justice system. I would say we are supportive in principle but our focus would be really on trying to increase the support available to First Nations families who are engaged with the care and protection system to try and close that avenue into the juvenile criminal justice system in the first instance.

THE CHAIR: Have you heard of any issues where people feel they are in limbo, between 12 and 14, and wondering where they may fit?

Ms Rosenman: We do not work in that area of the criminal justice space or with children. So, unfortunately, I cannot comment.

MR CAIN: Do you have any thoughts on the carve-outs that are proposed within the legislation?

Ms Rosenman: I am sorry; I cannot comment on those.

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much for appearing today before the committee. I do not think you have taken any questions on notice.

Ms Rosenman: I can give you some more information about the sexual harassment services.

THE CHAIR: Could you please provide your answers to the committee secretariat within three business days of getting the uncorrected proof *Hansard*? Thank you again for appearing.

Hearing suspended from 10.14 am. to 10.41 am.

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

KOLAK, MRS SHANNON, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2024-2025 and Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2023-2024. We will now hear from Mr Nicholas Lawler, CEO, and Mr Craig Wallace, Head of Policy, from Advocacy for Inclusion; and Mrs Shannon Kolak, CEO of ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. It is on the pink card on your desk. Mr Wallace, you would have had one emailed to you. Could you please confirm, starting with AFI, that you understand the statement and agree to comply with it.

Mr Wallace: Yes; I understand the statement and agree to comply.

Mrs Kolak: I understand the statement and agree to comply.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would either of you or both of you like to make a short opening statement, starting with Advocacy for Inclusion?

Mr Wallace: Chair, I understand that my CEO is trying to join us at the moment, so I suggest that you start with Shannon and then Nick Lawler might join us after.

THE CHAIR: Sure. Thank you.

Mrs Kolak: ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability supports people with intellectual disability and their networks in the Canberra region. We want to ensure 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, 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 that of members of our community with a physical disability, and it is important that the ACT government is aware of these differences and provides funding in the budget to address the specific needs of people with intellectual disability.

I thought you guys were going to go first, so I have written "As Craig mentioned", but you will hear him talk in a moment. We worked alongside Advocacy for Inclusion, Women with Disabilities ACT and the Mental Health Community Coalition to create a list of shared priorities and expectations ahead of the budget. For people with intellectual disability, we specifically wanted to see a financial commitment to implement the various disability strategies, investment in mental health care for people with intellectual disability, and significant investment in foundational supports. We are happy to see the government's commitment to funding and implementing the various strategies and the commitment to creating and funding a foundational support system. However, we remain concerned about the lack of investment in community mental health supports for people with an intellectual disability. While there has been significant investment in the community mental health centre for young Canberrans, I

do not believe that any of those services will be suitable for people with complex intellectual disability. There is one clinic in Canberra that treats people with mental health conditions and an intellectual disability. At present, the clinic only sees the most complex cases and there is a waitlist of over 70 families seeking treatment.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Lawler, from Advocacy for Inclusion, would you like to start? First, would you be able to say that you understand the privilege statement and protections offered to you? You would have had the statement emailed to you. Could you confirm that you agree to comply and understand the statement. Mr Lawler is on mute, I think. Mr Wallace?

Mr Wallace: Apologies for the technical difficulties. Advocacy for Inclusion welcomes the opportunity to appear today. I am reading a statement on behalf of Mr Lawler. These hearings are highly valued by us as an accountability tool. This year, AFI, together with our colleagues from ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability and the Mental Health Community Coalition ACT established and shared priorities and expectations ahead of the budget. In our pre-budget advocacy, we primarily sought to ensure that the various disability strategies for health, housing and education and whole-of-government disability reforms were actually funded. We also stressed the importance of some investments to respond to the findings of the disability royal commission, as well as recommendations stemming from the NDIS review, particularly the new foundational support system. In addition, we advocated for a focus on coordinated and integrated case management services for people and improved supply of affordable and accessible housing, as well as an intersectional approach to violence prevention and a support package for parents with a disability.

Overall, we welcome this budget and feel that it delivered some important and timely investment. While not all of our priorities were met, this is actually a good budget for us. In terms of foundational supports, we welcome the significant investment in the new system. The challenge will be ensuring that there is funding for the community to engage in a very major service reform. We were pleased to see measures in ACT Health and Canberra Health Services, especially the new multidisciplinary rehabilitation and disability support services for children.

The funding for the University of Canberra Hospital and the capital investments in Canberra Hospital are also really important. There is some further work to do. We think it is very important that investments in foundational supports and disability reform capability within the government also extend to the community sector and the capacity of people with disability to engage in yet another big reform process. We feel that there are some gaps around health and mental health services for people with disability, plus in education. Our colleagues from ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability can speak to these issues well. We see gaps in work to grow accessible and affordable housing, which you have heard about from us in a number of hearings, as well as in addressing transport disadvantage outside of the taxi scheme, intensive case management and providing disability supports around the new voluntary assisted dying regime.

There is more to do to stop violence against people with disability. We would have liked to see funding for the ACT Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy and a disability justice DLO within the Women's Legal Centre. We would like to see a more

explicit focus on accessibility within the various planning, heritage and housing choice reforms underway in the territory. We also believe that there is work to be done now on disability impacts in energy transition, transport reform and climate change. We do not often ask for money for ourselves in these forums, but we need to point out that disability is now an incredibly busy and complicated reform area, with multiple reforms underway at once which require our engagement. There is a really high need for advocacy in Canberra, with some organisations reporting extensive waiting lists. We are having to make difficult choices about where we engage and who we help.

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence today. I will probably be the primary person taking questions for Advocacy for Inclusion, but there are also our colleagues at ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: This is to both of you. Advocacy for Inclusion, I note that last year in estimates you said you were pleased that the papers clearly flagged an intention to fully fund and implement various disability strategies, but you remained concerned about the lack of specific up-front investment. I understand that part of the difficulty was that the ACT Disability Strategy and others were simply not complete at that point. With our now finalised ACT Disability Strategy in place, do you think we are adequately funding all our disability strategies?

Mr Wallace: You cannot sneeze at that kind of funding. There is about \$3 million for the Disability Strategy and about \$4 million for the Disability Health Strategy. I might have that slightly wrong, but that is roughly the quantum we are talking about. The issue is now more about where that funding actually goes. We are really keen that this funding, particularly for the Disability Health Strategy, should not be just on the activities of officials to develop the strategy and do more consultation and internal work within government. We want to start seeing some patient- and customer-facing work that actually happens on the ground to improve people's experiences, particularly in the health system. It would be disappointing if we get this kind of quantum of money and it just goes on further developmental work within government to do things like disability action and inclusion. This money needs to start making a difference on the ground now.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. Do you have anything to add?

Mrs Kolak: I agree with everything Craig said. When we look at things like the inclusive education strategy in the first action plan, I do not believe we see any money specifically earmarked for the implementation of the first action plan. However, there looked to be quite significant funding for the Education Directorate around inclusive practices. It looks like there is possibly some decent money being spent, but is it to actually implement the first action plan that was created? They are some of the questions that we have at the moment. While money is there and it looks great, is it going to be spent on the things that we, as a sector and as a community, believe are most important?

MISS NUTTALL: I have supplementary, if that is okay. Were you consulted on the implementation of the first action plan? Did you all have some back and forth

discussion?

Mrs Kolak: Not really. The first action plan and the inclusive education strategy were launched last year, I believe. We were looking for significant investment in that implementation and we have not heard anything more about it since then. I am sure there is a lot of work going on in the background. ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability and I have not had any further information about the implementation of the first action plan.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. That is helpful information.

MS ORR: Craig, could you indulge me for a minute. I have sat with you at many of these hearings over the years and you always come with a very thorough list of requests. I think this the first time I have read a submission where you have said it is pretty good, so I just want to get on the record that, while there is always a little bit of room for improvement, you are actually pretty happy with where we have landed with disability funding in this particular budget.

Mr Wallace: As I said earlier, we cannot sneeze at \$90 million of funding for the foundational support system. The ACT is the first jurisdiction to actually have funding for foundational supports at all. If that is matched by the commonwealth, then we are talking about \$180 million divided across five years. That is a \$36 million injection into the system. What I would say to qualify that, though, is that we need to ensure that a lot of that funding actually reaches the community sector and that there is the ability for people with disability to engage with what is yet another major re-imagining of the entire disability support system here in the ACT. It is not just okay for that to be government provisioning for the important reform work that needs to be done within government; there also needs to be real effort to ensure that the community is involved. But, yes, Ms Orr: this was a good budget for us in terms of the focus on disability in a tight environment. We acknowledge that.

MS ORR: That is for the foundational supports. There is also money for the ACT Disability Strategy, inclusive education, which we have touched on, and the Disability Health Strategy. The biggest takeaway that I have from this year's budget compared to previous years—and I think this is what you are saying, but correct me if I am wrong—is that it is now about working with the disability community to make sure that the money is applied in the best way possible to meet the needs of the community. It is about continuing to co-design and work on it. Is that correct? Is that where we are up to in this?

Mr Wallace: A little bit. It started with the health strategy, for instance. The envelope has been flagged to be a couple of million dollars, but what they are talking about in MYEFO is that they are going to use that money to build the reference group and do internal work and plain-English work, as well as some initial pilot projects. With that kind of money, I would expect some actual service improvements on the ground for patients with disability using the health system that draws on the extensive menu of things that Advocacy for Inclusion and other organisations have flagged as priorities for the health system. We have talked about the need for some upgrades to care in the Canberra Hospital and for training to be made available to all doctors and nurse practitioners on a social model. You could start to do some of that with that kind of

money. We welcome the money. We have a watchful eye on how it is spent.

MS ORR: Mrs Kolak, do you have anything that you want to add to that line of inquiry?

Mrs Kolak: To us, there has been a decent investment in disability, and we do like to see that because we certainly have not seen this level in previous budgets. There are some really small things missing. I talk about them every time I come here. They are around mental health for people with intellectual disability. There are several thousand people in the ACT with intellectual disability who possibly have mental health conditions that are not being met by the services we have in the ACT. It is a quite small investment. Hundreds of thousands of dollars could vastly improve these services and allow people to live a far better life in the ACT. So, while I think there is a decent amount of money being spent, some of that money does need to filter down to some of the smaller programs that make an enormous difference in people's lives. Overall, we are happy to see this level of investment, especially around the commitment to foundational supports and actually funding the strategies that we have spent years creating.

MS ORR: Picking up on mental health, Mrs Kolak, is that in diagnosing mental health conditions in people? It is a different diagnosis process—

Mrs Kolak: There is a government funded clinic for people with intellectual disability and mental health concerns. It is an excellent clinic. If you have a complex intellectual disability, it is one of the only places you can go to get a diagnosis and treatment. However, like I said in my opening remarks, at the moment they are only taking the most complex cases and there are over 70 families waiting in line. There is nowhere else for them to go in the ACT and they cannot go outside of the ACT, because, if you have an intellectual disability, once you try to see a psychiatrist and you say you are from the ACT, they say, "I am sorry. You need to seek services in the ACT." We are in dire straits at the moment. We have a lot of people who are in desperate need and there is nowhere else for them to go.

MS ORR: Mrs Kolak, in your assessment, is it a funding issue or is it about finding psychiatrists to work in that area?

Mrs Kolak: It could be both. We know that it is hard to find a psychiatrist anywhere in Australia, so that is one problem, and psychiatrists and psychologists that are specifically trained to work with people with intellectual disability are probably even harder to find. And I expect there is a funding problem as well—being able to pay those specialists the money they require to have a practice in Canberra or to work for the government in Canberra. I expect it is a far bigger problem nationwide, but I do want it brought to the attention of the ACT government that, while we have a clinic and we can say that is fabulous, it is chronically understaffed and, for a lot of people with intellectual disability, there is nowhere else for them to go. There is no private practice they can go to.

THE CHAIR: Advocacy for Inclusion, Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability, Women with Disability, and the Mental Health Community Coalition made a joint budget submission. I saw a joint media release as well which said that you were a bit disappointed with some of the aspects of the budget. Can you talk a bit more about

which aspects you were disappointed in?

Mr Wallace: I will take that initially and then Shannon might want to build on it. One of the things that happened in the first 24 hours is that we could not see the money for foundational funding. It was not in the outlook. Currently, it has been laid aside with some kind of provisional funding pool within the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate. Because we could not see the big bucket of foundational money, it coloured our initial commentary. Having said that, and even now that we know what we know, we think there are some sizable gaps in terms of intensive case management support for people who need lots of help to avoid them winding up in the CYPS system, homeless or in critical and acute care. That is work that we are trying to carry in our individual advocacy program, but there is clearly a gap with nobody responsible for it.

We were a bit confused about the education investments. While there is money for equitable enrolment, we want more money to actually implement the education strategy through increased student voting and work around universal design to ensure that more people with disabilities can access mainstream schools. We also thought that, while they are small gaps, they are quite impactful. There is a lack of attention around violence, and implementation of strategies to prevent violence is a problem.

The other glaring issues include housing. Outside of investments in public housing, we are not really seeing any considerable effort to gear up the private housing market and supply to be more responsive to people with disabilities, in terms of housing that is both affordable and accessible to them. We also wanted a package of money around voluntary assisted dying to prevent unintended outcomes. That included training for doctors and nurse practitioners who administer the programs so that they understand the social model of disability. We also wanted a funding pool to be available to people who might access that, as well as suicide prevention work. Those are some of the gap areas that we would highlight. While we think it is right to point out that there are some good things in the budget and that, overall, this is a better budget than the last couple, there are gaps and the gaps are not ones that you can just look past. They are considerable.

THE CHAIR: Thanks. Would you like to add anything?

Mrs Kolak: I agree with everything that Craig said. The other thing that I want to mention—and this is not something that we would usually mention in a forum like this—is that we asked for a very small amount of funding for advocacy type organisations like AFI, Women with Disabilities, and ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability. It was for under \$1 million in total which would allow organisations like us to continue this type of advocacy work—informing the government of what people with disability actually need. That money was not allocated in the budget. We need to look at the amount of work that small community organisations like ours are doing on the ground in systemic advocacy. A lot are doing it, like we are, with fundraising and donations from our community. We are not funded at all to do this work, but we think it is incredibly important because, without organisations like ours, the true voices of intellectual disability would not be heard by the ACT government.

MISS NUTTALL: I have a supplementary. Mr Wallace, you mentioned in your last answer something about gearing up the private sector to provide housing supply. Can you elaborate on what you mean by that?

Mr Wallace: Sure. With public housing, there are still levers that you have to pull, so we want more access-ready public housing at the gold level that people that can just move into. But there are some things that the government could do right now that will hopefully start to get the private sector moving, because it is essentially stuck. We think there needs to be specific tax breaks. There needs to be inclusion rezoning that covers not just affordable housing but also accessible supply. So, when you are doing land releases, the planning system needs to say, “You will get preferential treatment if you have sizeable and accessible supply. With output at the gold standard, you will get some preference.” We think there needs to be a program to identify rental housing that is accessible and available to people with disability. At the moment, it is going to market and real estate agents are not seeing it, for whatever reason, as a selling point, so it is hard to locate. It is hard to understand and utilise what is out there. Sometimes accessible houses are going to people who do not need them and other people are in the market searching for them and cannot find them.

We also think there needs to be improvement in rental application processes for housing and the provision of longer term leaseholds so that they work for people with NDIS packages who might want to invest in some modifications in them, as well as assistance with home modifications. And there needs to be a big marketing campaign and an industry development campaign to encourage and support the industry to supply access-ready dwellings, as well as some regulatory work on ensuring that there is provision for accessible housing within new multi-unit developments. That requires carrot-and-stick approaches from the government, and we all know there are a lot of multi-units going up around Canberra at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. In the interest of time, we have to come to a halt there. Unfortunately, we were unable to resolve some technical issues to allow Mr Lawler to participate. Mr Craig Wallace and Mrs Shannon Kolak, thank you for your appearance today. If you happened to take any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thanks again.

Short Suspension.

TYRREL, MS LAVINIA, Chief Executive Officer, Karinya House

THE CHAIR: We now welcome Ms Lavinia Tyrrel, CEO of Karinya House. I would like to remind our witness of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is the pink sheet that is in front of you on the table. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

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

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Tyrrel: Yes. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Karinya House is a local charity. In a nutshell, our mission is to support women before and after pregnancy who are experiencing crisis. This is the very important but quite narrow mandate about which I am talking to you today.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide insights on the budget. Our primary interest is really in seeing carers', particularly women's, needs elevated across this budget during the perinatal period. This is not just in one component of the budget; it needs to be understood that this is something which sits across all areas.

The moment a woman falls pregnant, she experiences more vulnerabilities than at almost any other time in her life. For example, the risk of domestic and family violence increases the moment she falls pregnant. At the same time, though, this period is critical and a time when a lot of women look to make change and chart a path forward for themselves and their children. This impacts not only a woman's family's wellbeing but also intergenerationally our Canberra community. Getting the support right in this period is critical.

Appreciating that it is a difficult fiscal environment for the government with this budget, we welcomed the ongoing investments in public housing, both new builds and repairs and maintenance. You cannot parent without safe, appropriate, affordable housing. We also welcomed ongoing support and increased support for frontline domestic and family violence services. Again, you cannot parent if you are not safe.

We would love to see a greater emphasis on the needs of women in this perinatal period across the budget, particularly across the domains of safety of appropriate housing and access to the quality services that you need during the perinatal period. To give one example, there is work ongoing from government to scope the potential for a stand-alone perinatal residential health facility in Canberra. We would love to see funding committed for the design and the capital works for this facility in forward budgets because that is a current gap in the service system.

THE CHAIR: Can you talk to us about how much funding and support you have received from the ACT government? Have you asked for more; have you received more? Can you also talk about indexation of any grants that you have received?

Ms Tyrrel: We are, on average, about 65 per cent government funded. That is the total of our service costs. That comes through the Community Services Directorate in the form of two grants. One is through Housing and Homelessness Services, which recognises that we are the only specialist homelessness service for pregnant and parenting women in the region. We also receive a grant through the child youth protective mothers and babies unit area. Those two comprise 65 per cent of our funding.

In terms of indexation, I understand that the current method for determining indexation is based upon CPI plus SCHADS wage increases. From our perspective, it would be great if that indexation rate was higher, because it currently does not take into account the full costs, particularly staff costs, above the annual wage increase—for example, things like rises in workers compensation, long service leave levy and so on. That is about 20 to 30 per cent above total salary costs that we cover.

THE CHAIR: You are saying that the indexation you are getting is not enough to cover some of those other increases?

Ms Tyrrel: Correct, yes.

MS ORR: Are you part of the group that is working with ACTCOSS and the Community Services Directorate on the sector sustainability project funding?

Ms Tyrrel: We have not been actively involved in that, no.

THE CHAIR: Has the cost-of-living crisis had an impact on the demand for your services or is it pretty steady, given it is largely about domestic and family violence?

Ms Tyrrel: The short answer is yes. There are three factors in the community which are driving ongoing demand for our service at the moment. One is the ongoing emergency crisis of domestic and family violence. The other is the challenge of accessing appropriate, affordable housing in the ACT. With almost every woman we support, her only exit pathway is into public housing, and almost every woman we support cannot access affordable housing schemes. If you think about during and after pregnancy, you are unlikely to be earning or to be returning to the workforce.

Those two factors are coupled with increases in the cost of living. Particularly last year, we saw more women coming to our service, as well as women returning to our service. I refer, for example, to women who had previously been doing really well, had secured some part-time work and had their children in child care. We received a call last year from a woman who was unable to put fuel in her car to get to work the next day. Women who have exited the service are doing really well for themselves, but they are really on that threshold, so if there are any changes in the cost-of-living crisis, they are the types of people in the community who we are seeing potentially being pushed back into poverty.

MS CASTLEY: You have mentioned domestic violence quite a bit. Do you have any idea of what percentage of the cases you see are from domestic and family violence?

Ms Tyrrel: We have not finalised our service data for the past financial year, but prior to that around 70 per cent of women at the time of referral identified current or previous experiences with domestic and family violence.

MS ORR: I think you said in your opening remarks that you work with a lot of the other service providers within the family and domestic violence response area. Can you run through in a little more detail, given that a number of the people coming through your service experience this, how you would start to make those linkages and get those supports for them?

Ms Tyrrel: Just to clarify, once a woman has come into the Karinya service or how they enter through another service?

MS ORR: How you interact with the other services to provide that overall support.

Ms Tyrrel: The first thing, just to clarify, is that Karinya House is not a specialist domestic and family violence service. We are specialists regarding pregnancy, parenting and homelessness. We are also not a crisis service, so we are not set up if, on that same day, you need accommodation that night. The best options would be for you to go through DVCS and other crisis services. I am saying that because the domestic and family violence crisis services in the ACT play a critical role in meeting that really immediate demand for women presenting on the same day or that week who need somewhere safe to go, and immediate support.

Often the referral will come through one of those services—Toora, Beryl, Doris, DVCS—if a woman is then in our criteria. That means she is pregnant and/or she is parenting a baby under three months of age. Funding for those services is critical for supporting women, all women, whether they are pregnant, parenting or not. But getting that funding right there also reduces the potential pressure on our service, because it means they can meet demand and they can do their job effectively.

MISS NUTTALL: We have been hearing from services that provide temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness that people are having to stay longer in those temporary accommodation places than was intended because there is not enough public housing for them to move into a long-term, secure home. Is that also affecting Karinya House?

Ms Tyrrel: Yes. We do have a very good relationship with our counterparts in Housing, and I know they try their best to find appropriate allocations for women that we support. That is very much constrained by the supply of stock that they have. I can clarify these figures afterwards, but I think it was from about 2019 to 2021 that we saw an increase of over 200 per cent in the average stay that a woman had at Karinya House. A large part of that was because of that bottleneck of public housing. As I mentioned earlier, the exit pathway for almost every woman that we support is into public housing, for financial reasons. That has eased a little bit in the last few months, as new stock has come online, which has been really welcome. One of the things we are thinking about looking forward—and the Pegasus report pointed to this as well—is how we ensure that we continue to reduce those wait times, particularly for women exiting Karinya House.

MS CASTLEY: You mentioned Toora, Beryl, Doris and DVCS as agencies that refer to Karinya House. Are they the main ones? From where would you see the bulk of the referrals?

Ms Tyrrel: Referrals generally?

MS CASTLEY: Yes.

Ms Tyrrel: It is a mix. We are a voluntary service, and we do receive a reasonable number of self-referrals. We also receive referrals through OneLink, through Housing. We also support a number of women who are engaged currently with the child and youth protective system. We receive joint referrals through them. Beyond that, it is other services and/or practitioners such as GPs or midwives. It is from quite a variety of places.

THE CHAIR: If we have self-referrals as well, how do people know about Karinya, to self-refer?

Ms Tyrrel: That is a good question. We are working to get a bit more service data on exactly how people come to know Karinya House, partly because we want to ensure that every woman who is eligible for our service in the region knows about it. From what we understand anecdotally, it is often through an engagement with a service, and that service either refers a woman to Karinya House or they come to know Karinya House through them and they refer themselves. The other thing that is interesting about the perinatal period is that it is also a time when women are engaging more with services, such as antenatal appointments, so there is also that opportunity to work with women for that reason.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for your attendance today. I do not think you took any questions on notice, but if you did, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the proof *Hansard*. Thank you again for appearing today and for all that you do at Karinya House.

Ms Tyrrel: Thank you very much.

CARTWRIGHT, MS ANGELA, Policy Manager, Asthma Australia

ELLISTON, MS LEANNE, Chief Executive Officer and Senior Dietitian, Nutrition Australia ACT

COX, MS DARLENE, Executive Director, Health Care Consumers' Association Inc

THE CHAIR: Welcome. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. It is the pink sheet on the table here. Ms Cartwright, you would have had one emailed to you. If we could start with Ms Cartwright, could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply?

Ms Cartwright: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Ms Elliston?

Ms Elliston: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Would any of you like to make a short opening statement? I will ask Ms Cartwright first, from Asthma Australia.

Ms Cartwright: Yes, I will make a short statement; thank you. Asthma Australia has been the leading charity for people with asthma and their communities for over 60 years, including as the Asthma Foundation in the ACT. Our purpose is to help people to breathe better so that they can live freely.

In the ACT we have 11.5 per cent of the population with asthma, which is 51,000 people. The ACT has the highest proportion of people nationally experiencing allergic rhinitis, which is closely linked to asthma and often known as hay fever. We know that in the ACT in 2022-23 there were over 10,300 emergency department presentations for respiratory illnesses, which include asthma, and that the average cost of an ED presentation is \$443. Particularly concerning for us is that repeated ED presentations for asthma increase the risk of hospitalisation.

Our organisation is really focused on addressing the challenges of climate change, unhealthy air and health inequity, which make it really important for people with asthma to have a voice; providing services to people with asthma; as well as, of course, addressing those causes and triggers for asthma.

In our budget submission for the year ahead we have put forward a number of proposals which will assist us to expand our support for people with asthma and specific communities in the ACT, as well as address some of those airborne hazards which are increasingly putting pressure on people with asthma and leading to things like ED presentations and general difficulty with quality of life, and the burden on people with asthma in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Elliston from Nutrition Australia ACT, would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms Elliston: Absolutely. Thank you for having me today. It is great to see you all. Nutrition Australia ACT is a health promotion charity. We are staffed by highly

experienced, accredited practising dietitians who have a strong passion and desire to support the nutritional health of Canberrans. We do this in many ways. We receive grant funding through the ACT government to deliver initiatives that are suitably targeted to community members who need that nutrition support. We also offer a range of services in the community, from workplaces to childcare services and schools, and support the ACT government on a number of initiatives when it comes to healthy eating and nutrition in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. In the budget submission for Asthma Australia, you ask for, I think, \$1.1 million over three years for service delivery. How much funding have you historically received from the ACT government, in the previous year and the years before that, and was the \$1.1 million that you asked for consistent with previous years?

Ms Cartwright: Yes. We have been happy with the amount of funding we have received from the ACT government. That funding has been indexed, which we greatly appreciate. What we know with asthma is that, particularly in the ACT, with the compounding, cascading burdens on people, we have more demand that we can meet through the programs that we provide. Our 1800 ASTHMA service is a critical service for people who have asthma or are caring for someone with asthma in terms of understanding triggers—things like wood heater smoke, mould in the home or bushfire smoke, for example.

If we are looking at the types of services we have provided in the past, we have had a phone service, and we are looking at really enhancing those services so that we can deliver care and support to people in ways that are convenient for them and meet their needs. The additional funding that we are seeking there will go towards enhancing what we are already doing and making sure that we are providing support in the way that suits people best.

THE CHAIR: Before I proceed, I would like to welcome Ms Darlene Cox, Executive Director of the Health Care Consumers' Association. Ms Cox, would you confirm that you understand the privilege statement and that you agree to comply? It would have been emailed to you.

Ms Cox: Yes, I understand and agree to comply; thank you.

THE CHAIR: Great. Would you like to make a short opening statement, Ms Cox?

Ms Cox: Given that I am a bit late, I think I will wait for questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We are very short on time, so I will move down the line to Ms Orr.

MS ORR: I have a question for Ms Cox on mental health. Can you provide a little bit more information about the issues consumers are experiencing that sit behind component 3 in your submission, which is about the range of and access to mental health services in the ACT?

Ms Cox: Yes. There is general practice. People go to general practice for mental health, absolutely, but often that is quite expensive and there are delays. It is not as responsive.

You cannot often get in on the day that you need that. People are accessing the walk-in centres, but, again, there is a particular scope of practice for those walk-in centres, and they then need to have strong referral points to Head to Health, for example, or other community-based services.

We have got a lot of funding going into government-provided community mental health services, with north-side and south-side community mental health, and then there are a whole range of non-government organisations that provide community health centres, so it is quite a fractured environment. It is almost like you have got to pick your condition, pick your date and know which service is the best one for you.

One of the things that we really like the idea of is something that they are running in Adelaide. It is an urgent care, 24/7 service. You know where it is—it is in the centre of the town—and you can go there and stay there for up to 24 hours. You can go and talk to someone. They can de-escalate, take a bit of a history and talk to you about what the issues are. It is a home-like environment where you can have something to eat, talk to someone, sit in a comfortable chair. There are consulting rooms as well. If you need to transfer to hospital, they can expedite that.

It is a really friendly space that has peer workers, as well as an accomplished and competent mental health workforce of registered practitioners. It has a really nice feel. They do not have any uniforms. They do not allow police, ambulance, doctors—anyone with a uniform—into that area. It is one of those things that we think is a missing element of what we offer in the ACT.

We know that people from Canberra Health Services and the Minister for Mental Health went and viewed the centre. They were interested in it. We think that it has real merit, because here it is so fragmented and so hard to know where to go for help. An urgent care clinic like the mental health clinic that they have in Adelaide is a really safe entry point for people.

MS ORR: Just picking up on that, I think you highlighted the need to investigate, implement and evaluate services to provide an appropriate mental health care pathway, and you have given the example of this Adelaide urgent care clinic. Is that the only gap that you see or are there specific services where there are gaps or a need for investigation of subacute and preventative models that you can see, beyond the example you have already given?

Ms Cox: When we look at the vast investment that the government makes in government-provided community mental health and we compare that to what is provided in the non-government sector, there is a parity issue there. A lot of the community organisations that work across mental health are doing it tough. We are waiting now for mental health commissioning, which is just starting to kick off, which is great, but we need a commitment of additional funds to meet the need across a whole range of psychosocial supports. As we see with the psychosocial support with the NDIS, the changes to that, we are probably going to see more and more people needing services in the community outside the NDIS model.

MS ORR: The last thing that I just wanted to pick up on in your submission is that you talk about the need for individual advocacy. Do you consider mental health to be an

area where there is considerable need for this kind of service?

Ms Cox: It is right across the health system. Whether it is maternity services, mental health, end of life, we see that more people need individual advocacy. We get more and more complex phone calls at the office from members of the public who are highly distressed. They are confused. They have come up against barriers to care that they are needing help with, and we do our best to connect them to the services or refer them to the Human Rights Commission where appropriate. A lot of the people that we are talking to now are living with lots of different chronic conditions, but there are also issues around living with disadvantage or stability of housing, trouble with the treating teams and really having their voices heard. So, yes, it is definitely about mental health but it is also about people living with other chronic conditions.

MS ORR: Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: To everyone here: do you think the ACT government has been proactive enough on climate change in particular to protect Canberrans' health, and with respect to our adaptation?

Ms Cartwright: The ACT has done some really nation-leading work in terms of climate change, particularly around transitioning away from harmful energy resources and providing some support to households in that transition. That is particularly important for asthma, with gas appliances being a major trigger for childhood asthma.

When it comes to adaptation, most people in the ACT with asthma will have experienced very personally the impacts of the 2019-20 bushfire crisis if they are triggered by a particulate matter, which a lot of people with asthma are. We heard from people during that crisis in the ACT who had not had any asthma symptoms for years or even decades. They found that, for the first time, their symptoms were flaring up again.

I think that fire crisis, for Canberrans, really highlighted the changing nature of the climate change driven hazards that people are facing. With the best advice we had for people at the time, an Asthma Australia survey of more than 12,000 people found that people who took action to try and protect themselves against exposure to smoke were still experiencing asthma symptoms. It really showed us that what we were telling people was no longer fit for purpose.

We have had some funding from the ACT government to deliver a short, targeted, air-smart public education campaign, but we need funding to roll out a campaign to prepare people for the upcoming bushfire season in particular, because we cannot have another unprecedented crisis. That cannot happen twice. People will not accept again not being given the information and support they need. I think that is a critical need.

There is also some adaptation support needed for people with asthma that will help with other chronic health conditions, particularly for low-income people, such as HEPA air purifiers in homes, which we have addressed in our budget submission. We also drastically need more local air quality information, not just for bushfires and the smoke they produce but also for wood heaters, which I would note contribute to climate change as well through their emissions.

THE CHAIR: Ms Cox?

Ms Cox: Thanks for the question. It is a really important area of focus for all of us. I think one of the things in terms of the government's approach is that it has to be about more than electrification. Electrification is a great start, but we also need to be looking at mitigation around the way health care is delivered. What about the medicines that we are using? Let us look at cradle to grave; let us look at the life cycle of these. What is the long-term impact? Let us have a look how we can reduce transport in the way health care is delivered. We know that transport is one of the biggest area of pollution relating to the delivery of care.

Let us not slow down on our commitment to moving to virtual care and providing that as an opportunity and moving care closer to home for people. It is great that the new buildings that are coming online are compliant with the standards and that we are looking at inert materials and solar-passive principles, the use of natural light and heating, and openable windows—a whole range. Even in the Canberra Hospital campus master planning they are looking at the importance of green spaces. We also need seating, shaded areas for people to cope with the extreme heat when they are on the campus.

It is about more than electrification. What we would like to see is for government to set up a dedicated unit within the Chief Health Officer's area in the Health Directorate that can focus on it and look at the implementation of the national framework on climate and health. We have got a lot more work to do, but unless we have a dedicated home for it, we are concerned that our focus will be diluted and we will not see the achievements and the progress we need.

Going to Angela's point: I really agree with her on the public health impacts of wood smoke that she talked about.

THE CHAIR: Ms Elliston, anything you would like to say?

Ms Elliston: I can only really speak from a nutrition and food perspective. When it comes to bringing climate change into the picture, it is about setting people up to eat healthy vegetables, seasonal produce, locally grown, and establishing that whole community where we know where our food comes from—number one. That comes from a young age, in early childhood settings and through schools, which is one of the areas that I have targeted in our submission.

Where we get our food and the impact of our food does play a role in climate change, as does the waste of our food and managing that. Why are we wasting food? Is it because we do not know what to do with that food; we do not know how to use our leftovers? Whilst we talk so much about trying to encourage people to have more vegetables, we live in a society where we rely heavily on convenience foods.

Many children and young adults do not know how to cook from scratch and are purchasing many of those ultra-processed foods, convenience foods. The production of those foods is a strain on the environment. We can do more in our community to support individuals to prepare food from scratch, using locally grown food and even growing

foods themselves. It is the simple things. That is the start of helping to shift towards a more sustainable way of living.

MISS NUTTALL: What do you think are the greatest risks to health, as far as climate change goes, moving forward? Is it those imminent disasters? Possibly it depends, based on your perspective.

Ms Elliston: Yes. From my perspective, it is access to food, making sure that food production is available within our environment and that we maintain that ability to ensure that people have the power to procure the food that they need. It is about having opportunities for community gardens, for instance—and backyard chickens, which right now is probably not the best idea. Locally produced food and having that access is really, really important.

THE CHAIR: Ms Cox?

Ms Cox: Yes. Thank you. Honestly, I think the biggest risk is the glacial pace of change and the lack of urgency around a climate emergency. This is a complex issue that we need to be focused on and taking active steps on. What we are wanting to see is an action plan. What is happening in the next five years? What are we looking to achieve in year 1, year 2 and year 3? Unless we have a structured, dedicated view, we are not going to achieve the level of change we need.

As someone who has a 10-week-old grandchild, I look and think about the planet that they are inheriting and it is something that I and many other grandmothers spend their time worrying about. If we can do something to embrace more than electrification and recognise that we have to change the way we deliver health care to reduce carbon emissions then I would be a happier person.

Ms Cartwright: I could not agree more with Darlene and Leanne's comments so far. From an asthma perspective, a really huge risk of climate change is deepening existing health inequities. We know that people from low-income areas are more likely to have asthma, more likely to live in poor-quality housing and more likely to have other comorbid health conditions as well. Climate change impacts have been described as a risk magnifier. They make all of these things worse, and we are just not prepared.

A huge risk in the ACT is that we know that we are experiencing increasing airborne hazards, as a result of climate change, but there is not enough action to reduce the avoidable sources of air pollution. Wood heaters are at the top of the list there for the ACT. We also need accelerated progress around vehicle emissions, for example. We absolutely need to increase the resilience of the healthcare system, but there is a huge amount of work that we could be doing more of, and faster, in terms of preventing conditions like asthma.

Properly addressing wood heaters will not only reduce the exacerbations of asthma; it will address a whole range of other health impacts, including cardiovascular, neurological, premature birth and premature death outcomes. We have welcomed the commitment to phasing out wood heaters, but 2045 is too late. In a climate change context, there will be many, many more airborne hazards between now and then, which we have very little ability to control.

MS CASTLEY: I have a question for Ms Elliston about the FEED program pilot. I believe you got some grant money for that. Could you outline the importance of this program? Is it running? What is the status? Is it continuing? Do you have certainty of funding?

Ms Elliston: Thank you very much for the question. FEED is an ACT government grant funded program that just kicked off this year and will continue throughout next year as well. The acronym stands for Fuelling Everybody Every Day. We are targeting children aged from three to 18 who exhibit what we would call atypical eating behaviours. These are children that are generally quite fussy and picky in their food intake. It can be very challenging when it comes to building on or creating that healthy relationship with food. We want to capture them at a younger age. It is a partnership with play therapists, so it involves play therapy as well as that dietetic approach to give children positive exposure to foods. It is an eight-week program. We work with ACT dietitians, the paediatric dietitians, so we are collaborating with them significantly.

This program essentially gives these children an opportunity to try foods in a positive, engaging way and broaden their diet to become a lot healthier. It makes it less scary. It is about preventing consequences further down the track. People who have such a limited diet can increase their risk of chronic disease and so on. The program has been very well received. We are targeting children from vulnerable backgrounds, particularly in the adolescent age groups. We work with PCYC and the P180 group and Galilee School as well. We try to target it to families that need it the most, that cannot afford, for instance, to get that dietetic support out there.

MS CASTLEY: The funding for it, the grant that you received, how long is that going to last? Is there more money in the budget or will it be another grant?

Ms Elliston: That would have to be seeking further funding. Like many projects that we do at Nutrition Australia ACT, we get the grant, we get to deliver the program and we get to evaluate and find the outcomes and the impacts of these programs. We submit the report, and we try to continue some element of that in the community because they have been found to be quite impactful. We will be seeking to do what we can, depending on the outcomes of this program. So far, it is very promising and very exciting.

MS CASTLEY: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: I might go to Asthma ACT again. You said we have one of the highest rates of rhinitis; what was the term that you used there?

Ms Cartwright: Hay fever.

THE CHAIR: Why is that? Is it partly the topography or geography of the ACT? You did touch on wood heaters, but what are some of the other reasons why?

Ms Cartwright: We know that pollen is a major cause or trigger for hay fever and allergic rhinitis.

THE CHAIR: Do we have more pollen? Why is it worse?

Ms Cartwright: Because it is an allergen. When people breathe in pollen, if they are sensitive to that—

THE CHAIR: I understand that, but why more in the ACT than anywhere else?

Ms Cartwright: It would be due to the types of plants that are in and around the ACT. For example, if you look at thunderstorm asthma, that is believed to be driven by certain types of pollen, which can travel hundreds of kilometres. It is a combination of the weather patterns that can bring in the pollen from far away—that is the ryegrass pollen, for example—and lots of flowering plants in the ACT.

Lots of places have different types of pollens. There is lots of native pollen, for example, that can be irritating to people. I can take it on notice for you, if you are interested to find out more about the specific pollens, but it would definitely be a combination of what is within the territory and what has the potential to enter, because the ACT does have thunderstorm asthma warnings. It is known as the hay fever capital of the country for a reason. People with allergic rhinitis can be triggered by other things, for example, like particulate matter from wood heaters or bushfires. All of these things are increasing, including pollens. Pollen patterns are changing as a result of climate change as well. There are longer seasons, higher concentrations, different types of pollens, for example.

MISS NUTTALL: To the Health Care Consumers' Association in particular: I understand that voluntary assisted dying is due to be implemented next year. What is your view on the need for palliative care services within the community?

Ms Cox: Palliative care service is a really important aspect of end-of-life care, and it goes hand in glove with any voluntary assisted dying options. At the moment, palliative care needs to be enhanced. We need to see an increase in medical support but also support through Palliative Care ACT around the volunteer program, to make sure that we have the volunteers to provide people with support at the end of life, particularly the families, who are managing quite complex medications. We need access to treating teams, monitoring for symptoms, when you are all experiencing a level of distress with what is happening anyway.

The other thing is that we are interested in having a 24/7 phone line for families and people receiving palliative care to phone. At the moment, that is not in place here. We know other jurisdictions have it and it is very welcome and there is value for families and the patients as well. It might be something that Palliative Care ACT could take up. It does not necessarily need to sit with Canberra Health Services, but it is something that we would be encouraging the government to explore.

We think that people need someone to phone, because often we do not get sick in business hours. We need someone to phone if it is 10 o'clock at night, if it is 4 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon, and we know that they can help us through that next little period.

MS CASTLEY: I have a really quick follow-up with regard to palliative care. I know there was money in the budget for expanded services, but I believe that has been pushed out. I would love your thoughts on what impact that will have on our consumers.

Ms Cox: I would be delighted take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: We need to wrap it up there. I would like to thank Asthma Australia, Nutrition Australia ACT and the Health Care Consumers' Association for attending today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you again for your time today, and thank you for all the great work that you do.

COPLAND, MR SIMON, Executive Director, Pedal Power ACT

THE CHAIR: I would like to welcome Mr Simon Copland from Pedal Power ACT. I would like to remind the witness of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege. I draw your attention to the privilege statement; the pink sheet in front of you. Could you please confirm you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

Mr Copland: Yes, I understand the statement and agree to comply.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to read a brief opening statement?

Mr Copland: I can make a very brief statement. All I would like to say to start off with is that the ACT government has an approved active travel plan, which we think has some excellent goals and ways forward for active travel in the ACT. What we have said in our budget submission, and will continue to be saying, is we need to be seeing the investment to make this happen. We do not believe we are quite there yet to see the investment to make this happen. There are a lot of benefits to active travel in Canberra, both for our climate and in reducing congestion for people's health, but we need to see a proper investment and a real plan to make that happen. Ready to take questions.

THE CHAIR: You sort of talked about this in your brief opening statement: the ACT government talk a big game about cycling infrastructure, but do their actions and investment back up the rhetoric?

Mr Copland: We are seeing some shift in this where we are seeing attempts to change how we do funding around active travel and seeing more investment in this. One thing we were pleased about, for example, was the recent round of road safety grants that was a partnership with the federal government, where the ACT was the only jurisdiction that made active travel part of that project. It was really good to see that. However, we do feel the level of investment is not currently comparable with the challenge that we are facing and the requirements for active travel. A lot of the projects that are announced that are very good projects are being rolled out extremely slowly. There are some bureaucratic issues there and there are also some funding issues there that can be addressed. A great example of this is one where the construction has started today; the Garden City Cycle Route—literally started today, which is great. We are really happy to see that construction started, but it has taken years and years to get us to this point. We still only have funding committed to the first stage of it, and there are still two other stages to go. This is building a shared path. It should not take this long for these types of things to happen.

THE CHAIR: Another example, one that I have heard about many times, is the Athllon Drive and Sulwood Drive intersection. We have heard about that many times, but it seems to be taking quite a long time.

Mr Copland: Yes. Is the underpass underneath Sulwood Drive the one you are talking about?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Copland: That, again, is something that has been on our agenda for many years now. We have been told it will be part of the Athllon Drive duplication project and we have seen designs for that underpass to be constructed. Again, we do not have a timeline for that, but we are very happy that it is happening. We hope that can happen soon. We know it is part of this budget and the Athllon Drive duplication project will be starting soon. We hope that it is going to be one of the first priorities of getting the underpass done. It will also connect to the Sulwood Drive shared path. All of that work is happening on Sulwood Drive at the moment and we are happy with that shared path, but again, it was something that was announced I think a couple of years ago and we still have not quite seen it happen. The pattern is great projects that we support, but how do we roll them out and how do we get them out faster? We are talking about building shared paths here. They can be things that can be done a bit more quickly.

MISS NUTTALL: On specific projects, how do you feel about the Monaro Highway project, and in particular, it not having a separated path from the outset?

Mr Copland: Yes. It has been a disappointment for many of our members that the separated path has not been part of that. I know that since well before my time at Pedal Power it has been a piece of campaigning people have been doing to get that separated path. For people who want to ride long distances, and we are seeing more people riding longer distances with their bikes—from Tuggeranong to the city that would be the most direct route. They could create a real kind of spine which could also go up to Gungahlin with the great path we have along the Majura Parkway. We are pretty disappointed to see that it is not part of the current works. We have been told that it will happen at some point in the future, but again there is no clear timeline about when it will happen, and we would like to see it happen.

When it comes to projects like road duplications—we have questions around the value of road duplications in themselves—but if the government is going to duplicate roads, you should do the paths at the same time. When there is already the disruption happening and work is already happening, adding in a shared path or a cycle lane at the same time is actually quite a minimal amount. It is the tiniest cost possible. So why would you duplicate the process and do it again? Just do it all at once.

MS ORR: My question picks up on the point of road duplications too because I was reading through a submission you made, I think to the community budget, and there is a bit in there that says, “stop duplicating roads.” I was wanting to get a clearer articulation of the link you are making between what you advocate for as active travel and how not duplicating roads is the key to achieving that.

Mr Copland: I do not think it is the key to achieving that. The key to achieving that is building proper cycling infrastructure, but there are two elements to that. First of all, we are saying that there needs to be a look at the budget prioritisation around transport in Canberra. We know that we have a limited budget. We recognise that. At the moment the ACT government is championing that they are spending \$94 million on active travel over the forward estimates. We are spending more than that on the duplication of William Hovell Drive; one road. We are spending about the equivalent of that on the duplication of Athllon Drive, despite the fact that Tuggeranong at the moment is decreasing in population and there is not actually a huge increase in the demand in those areas. So, part of it is a budget question. Where can we best spend our money?

The second element is the element of induced demand. To get people on bikes you need to have good infrastructure and you need to make it so that infrastructure is the most convenient. The research shows that when you build infrastructure: it is kind of the build it and people will come approach. Research shows that when you duplicate roads what happens is that more people get into cars because they see a better road, and that has two impacts. First of all, it discourages people from using other alternatives. From around the world, the evidence is really clear that road duplications end up being just as congested within a couple of years' time. So, it does not actually achieve any of the benefits that are being touted, such as it will reduce times, because more people get into their cars because they see a duplicated road. So they get on that road, and then it becomes just as congested. It discourages people from using alternatives, which also increases the problem, so people just end up in more cars with more congestion. We just think there are better alternatives for how we can spend our transport money. We think that in removing one of those duplications we could double the amount of money we are spending on active travel, which could have a huge impact on how people are getting around Canberra.

MS ORR: Mr Copland, is it fair to say that your priority in improving active travel networks is a bit like you have just explained: more demand for people to take cycling up or other forms of active travel would come with providing more infrastructure? Can we decouple that though from road duplications because would that not stand alone? If you invest in that active travel network you will see those benefits come through?

Mr Copland: Not necessarily. Yes, if we were to do the road duplications and the cycling infrastructure at the same time, we would probably be pretty happy. But, again, the research from around the world suggests that you need to be thinking about how you prioritise the budget spend on this. Even if there was an unlimited budget, this would still be the case. Part of it is about prioritising active travel investment and active travel, and encouraging people to stay in active travel. Part of it is about providing some discouragement for people to get in their cars because cars provide pollution. They take up lots of space. Cars also create congestion. If we continue to have policies and infrastructure that encourage people to get in cars solely then people will be less inclined to get on bikes or to do other things. So, you have to have that encouragement and some slight discouragement at the same time.

MS ORR: The things that you have raised though for this encouragement are not necessarily around reasons that would prevent you from cycling.

Mr Copland: No, but it is about what the incentives are. When you are there and you have to make a choice about what is the best way to get to a location, we need to be thinking about making it as good as possible for people to get on bikes and there are lots of ways we can do that. We also need to think about discouraging people from getting in their cars because people are making those choices. You need to be able to have both of those: the carrot and the stick approach.

MS ORR: The reason I push this though is not necessarily because I love car-based transportation. I am happy to put it on the record that I do not. In all my experience professionally before coming into this place as an urban planner, and also being in this place now, people are quite wedded to their car transportation. As soon as you say we

are going to make you do something as opposed to we are going to show you how there is a great alternative, you get a lot of pushback, which is a little bit self-defeatist in some respects.

Mr Copland: I am not saying here that we are going to close down roads. What we are talking about is spending hundreds of millions of dollars on duplicating the roads we already have. The government is making active choices to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on duplicating roads even though the evidence shows it will not achieve anything. There are political decisions to be made here, which is what these road duplications are. It was really quite disappointing to see the government call this a roads budget when we know that it does not achieve anything except for an increase in pollution and an increase in congestion.

So yes, I can see your point if I was coming here and saying let us shut down Athllon Drive, which we are clearly not, or let us close down William Hovell Drive. What we are saying is, maybe we could reconsider whether we need to spend over \$100 million on duplicating those roads when it does not achieve anything. I think that is a reasonable question to ask about whether the government is best spending money when we could be spending it on things that have a greater impact on our transport.

MS ORR: Just once more because I think we are going a little bit around in circles here. Again, there seems to be quite a strong binary coming through in the answers you are providing, which is we should stop doing roads and we should start putting in cycle infrastructure. I am understanding the reasons you put forward but I am just not seeing quite how one solely determines the other, and why that has to be the thing that happens because would it not be better to be investing in good cycle infrastructure and helping people to opt into that option?

Mr Copland: I think you are taking one line out of a multipage document because we are clearly not saying that. We had one section on road duplications. The vast majority of our budget submission is about investing in cycling infrastructure. I do not think there is any point at which we would say this is the key to achieving this. We are just saying, in the time in which we have budget constraints, we should think about whether road duplications—and, again, we are not saying “not roads.”

We would never say, for example, do not continue maintenance of roads. In new suburbs we need to have roads. We do not oppose, for example, the Molonglo Bridge development which is a clear need at this point in time. We are talking about road duplications that are not needed and it is one line or one short paragraph in our submission that is surrounded by a lot of other material about investments. So we do not agree with the categorisation that we have this binary. We are saying this is one level of investment we think that could be better directed elsewhere.

THE CHAIR: In places like Tuggeranong, Lanyon Valley, Banks, Condor and around there, it is quite a commitment to ride your bike. Even improving cycle infrastructure perhaps is not going to encourage a lot of people from those further afield areas to active travel into town, but I think equally they deserve a safer and potentially faster commute so they can get to and from work and spend more time with their families. Despite all the money we have been spending on cycling infrastructure how are the trends in cycling going? Are we getting more people cycling? Are we getting any noticeable

improvement or is it staying consistent?

Mr Copland: One thing I would say is that we are not expecting people from Banks or Conder or Calwell—we live in Gungahlin. My partner works at Calwell High School. I am not expecting him to get on his bike and ride to and from work every day. The research is pretty clear that people are most likely to use active transport in those trips under five kilometres. So, if you live in Banks or Conder or Calwell, what we are actually talking about is the ability to ride to the local shops; the ability to ride the kids to school, for example, if you are working from home; or to get to health facilities, those kinds of places. You might want to get to the Tuggeranong Town Centre if that is where you work.

Even though there is some disappointment about Monaro Highway given the investment that has been put in there, if the investment was not happening in the Monaro Highway at the moment we would not have been pushing hard for that to be a cool link because actually it is the links from those local shops, those local areas, to local places that are more important. I think that is the most important thing. I recognise—

THE CHAIR: You get people home quicker and safer via a duplicated Athllon Drive and they have more time to ride their bike.

Mr Copland: Yes, but at the moment the Athllon Drive duplication we have been told will save, I think the minister said, two minutes. As I said, the evidence shows that in a couple of years—because more people will be using that road, and because we are putting in three sets of traffic lights because of that duplication—we expect that it will end up slowing down people’s commutes, not the opposite. That is where it becomes a problem. The evidence on whether road duplications work is not very clear. What actually works is encouraging more people off roads through public transport, through active transport. If you can get more people off roads through those then the roads clear up. I mean, people who need to do those commutes can do them faster. So, if we invest more in active and public transport it can help people get off the roads and that is a better way to achieve the goals which you are talking about.

MISS NUTTALL: Noting today’s announcement on building the Garden City Cycleway—I think you touched on this earlier, it was not quick enough—what do you think the hold-ups are?

Mr Copland: Yes, that is a really good question and we have been trying to figure out what some of the hold-ups are. I think there is a case for some work we are doing with the directorate around being faster in doing the processes around design and consultation. We do think it is important to consult with the community but I think we can also fall into the trap of over-consultation when we are talking about footpaths effectively, or shared paths. These are not major pieces of infrastructure like when we are talking around the light rail or hospital expansion and those types of things. So, there could be ways to speed up those processes.

Then there is also just ensuring the funding is there for it. At the moment we have three stages for the Garden City Cycle Route. We have funding for Stage 1. We could see the government invest and commit to the other stages and when that funding would come, which would be quite useful to ensure the processes are happening.

The final thing that I think is something that has slowed down things has been an over reliance on outside contractors, not just for construction but also for maintenance. One of the things we were certainly really pleased about with this budget is that the government is insourcing some of the maintenance work. So, when there is a cracked path somewhere instead of having to get a contractor and do up a contract to get them to do it, there will be a team that can just do that work. We are really happy with that because it means there can be a faster rollout of maintenance work.

Hopefully, what we would like to see in the future, is that team expand to be the ones that are also constructing these projects so that they can just go out and do them rather than having to go through all the tendering process. The Garden City Cycle Route is a good example of this. We are doing Stage 1 and Stage 1 has been split into three stages. There are three separate contracts. That is work and people's time and money and things like that. If we were to be able to insource that it would hopefully speed up the processes.

MISS NUTTALL: Do you think we get enough federal funding for paths like the cycle route?

Mr Copland: I have been really pleased to see the government pushing the federal government to invest in active travel. I think the ACT government is the first around the country doing that, and we are seeing a shift here in which the ACT government is asking for more federal investment in active travel. This happened with the road safety grants recently, and part of that is the Kingston Cycleway, which is really great to see. I would love to see more. I am sure the ACT government would love to see more, and in conversations with the minister, they would love to see more. We will keep encouraging folks to keep asking. I would just say at the moment it is really great that they are doing that, because it is going to help with getting this rollout of infrastructure.

THE CHAIR: We must leave it there and wrap up. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice—

Mr Copland: I do not think I did.

THE CHAIR: We will not go through that then but thank you again for coming today and thanks for your advocacy for cyclists and cycling infrastructure. We will reconvene at 1.20 pm.

Mr Copland: Thank you.

Hearing suspended from 12.11 pm to 1.20 pm

JOHNS, MR KENT, Head of Government Relations and Regulatory Affairs, National Electrical and Communications Association

SCOTT, MS FIONA, Director of Policy, National Electrical and Communications Association

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to today's public hearings for our inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2024-25 and Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2024-2025. The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. If you take a question on notice, it would be useful if you said, "I will take that question on notice.". It will help the committee and witnesses to confirm from the transcript questions taken on notice.

We now welcome representatives from the National Electrical and Communications Association: Mr Kent Johns, Head of Government Relations and Regulatory Affairs, and Ms Fiona Scott, Director of Policy. I would like to remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is the pink sheet on the table. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and agree to comply with it?

Mr Johns: Yes, I agree.

Ms Scott: Yes; thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Johns: I can make a very short one. We very much appreciate being asked to come and give evidence today. NECA, as you know, represents over 7,000 electrical subcontracting and communications firms across Australia. We are the leading industry association for the electrical industry. We want to thank the ACT government for, within this particular bill, increasing the electrotechnology certificate III funding from, I think, around \$12,000 up to \$18,810, which is a 90 per cent fee subsidy. While we do note it is being done, we are concerned that, when we had a similar issue in New South Wales, it was pro-rated back to the apprentices that we currently train, which means that we will still have three to four years of training our apprentices at a rate that is only subsidised by about 50 per cent of the cost.

As the ACT government is aware—and is at the forefront in trying to tackle the challenge of climate change—the push for net zero has led us to ascertain through Jobs and Skills Australia that around 35,000 electricians need to be qualified over the next 10 years. If that is to be done, it needs to be realised that, with a four-year training cycle, we have only two training cycles to get 35,000 electricians. We also acknowledge that CIT must take a central and pivotal role in the training of the next crop of electricians. But, even with CIT running at 100 per cent or 150 per cent and with NECA and industry and union training organisations, which are not-for profit, running at in excess of what we do now, we are going to struggle to meet that demand.

We are requesting that the government of the ACT look at not only the funding of this but also possibly look at fee-free training for electricians and the construction sector. We are also looking at infrastructure demands to provide for that additional training.

We now turn electricians away. There is sometimes up to a 12- or 14-month wait from the time that you take your apprenticeship to when you can actually attend the college. That is a national issue; it is not something specific to the ACT, but the ACT is struggling as well. NECA is a group training organisation and a registered training organisation. We are a not-for profit, a charity if you will. All our money is returned back. We actually lose money on the cert 3 training packages and we make that back up through either industry support or through post-trade training and that sort of thing.

They are the things that we wanted to focus on and have a look at: fee-free training for the relevant construction industries, but particularly electro-tech; the development of the operation of the Energy Centre of Excellence, which we would like to partner with government and with CIT on, to make sure that we are providing the greatest courses and the best experiences for the apprentices that we have; we want to grow the VET workforce; and integration of the recommendations of the Jobs and Skills Australia's Clean Energy Capacity Study, which is the identification of those.

Just as background, when we talk about NECA training and apprenticeships, we currently sit at a 90 per cent completion rate, which is substantially above that of other training facilities. We also have a 15 per cent female participation rate, which is sitting about 12 per cent above the industry average. We are very proud of what we do at NECA. As I said, I am more than happy to answer questions but we particularly wanted to focus today on training. We are in a desperate state of affairs to get more electricians on the ground.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to questions.

MISS NUTTALL: I would like to clarify something. When you are talking about capacity, are you struggling to find qualified instructors who will deliver up-to-date training and stay up to date themselves? Is that a big restricting factor?

Mr Johns: We have one particular state where we struggle with trainers, but, within the ACT, a lot of our trainers have traditionally come from people that were retired and wanted to be off the tools. We are now finding that a lot of trainers are coming in in their mid-30s and mid-40s and they want to go into the education space. We do not have an issue. Because we are an industry association, if someone wants to go into a training capacity, we will actually train them to become training officers in our organisation. We find a lot of people coming into that.

It is also a flexible relationship. If someone is starting a family, they may want to come off the tools for five or six years, and they have the opportunity to work two or three days a week. We also have some that enjoy the flexibility of being a trainer for three days a week and spending two days in their own business as well. So that balance is there. It is a strange situation where everyone is talking about a shortage of trainers. We do not seem to have that same shortage, but we are a great organisation—people like us. I just thought I would throw in the ad.

MISS NUTTALL: Absolutely. One of the issues I have heard is that it is difficult to achieve pay parity based on what you could be making in the sector as opposed to what you could be making as an instructor. Does that seem to be an issue?

Mr Johns: No.

MISS NUTTALL: That is amazing. Do you think that the current fee-free TAFE allocation here in the ACT is meeting the needs of the workforce currently? Do you think we have enough places as is?

Mr Johns: No.

MISS NUTTALL: How much would we be looking at to scale it up to provide that? I appreciate that you have given federal statistics for how many people you need trained in the forecast, but what does that look like in the ACT?

Mr Johns: I think we could double our capacity and we would still be able to put them in. We currently have I think—what is it, Fiona?

Ms Scott: 300.

Mr Johns: We currently have 300 apprentices within our training facility, and there is a waiting list.

Ms Scott: We have an overflow facility at Queanbeyan as well.

Mr Johns: Yes, we have had to go into Queanbeyan. That was mainly due to the funding that the ACT government was providing. In Queanbeyan, we cannot take on ACT students. It is just not economically viable. So we have opened a new facility there. We were actually at the point where we were doing our solar training in the car park, just to get capacity there to get the kids through.

There are a lot of not only kids but also mature-aged apprentices now applying. A good statistic is that, of the females that have applied for an apprenticeship in electrotechnology, 85 per cent are classified as mature-aged students, which means they are over 21. The dilemma we have is based on the pay scales. Most employers cannot justify the \$40,000 over four years to take on mature-aged students. If you wanted a recommendation of how we could provide that: if you provide subsidies for female, mature-aged electricians, we would be able to upskill a lot more students. We actually find that they are probably the best apprentices because they have that maturity to go into electro-tech.

Ms Scott: Flicking back to your previous question, we have female trainers at our Fyshwick facility, because we do have that relationship with the industry and we obviously have industry members on the board of our industry association as well as the training organisation, which provides that pathway through. So, when women are potentially looking for different flexible work arrangements, training is an option that they may look at. In fact, our principal—our headmaster—of the Fyshwick facility is also a woman.

Mr Johns: And the president of our association is a woman.

Ms Scott: Yes, and she runs an electrical business here in the ACT as well—in Queanbeyan, I might add. So there is quite a lot of flexibility here, which is why we do

not necessarily have that challenge. Unlike the more government-led training organisations, because we are the industry association, we have that link to industry, which is why it is not such an issue and also why things like our completion rates are higher than what you will see through TAFEs and things like that in other jurisdictions.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you very much.

MS ORR: I wanted to pick up on the TAFE placements and the user choice subsidy for electrotechnology. You said that you could train twice as many people as you are currently doing. It sounds like there is quite a bit of demand there for training, but there has been a lot of work put in to providing more opportunities. So, obviously, getting that balance has to be a work in progress. We have had quite a few high-level statements and I want to get into the detail a little bit more about the opportunities that are there and how everyone can work together to make sure we are filling these needs.

Mr Johns: You are absolutely right. CIT is integral to the training packages that you are going to be putting through here. We work in partnership with the unions and the TAFEs—because all we really want to do is get kids out there. If, for example, you were able to place, we could work alongside CIT. We do not want to be seen as a competitor.

MS ORR: Because you are not doing the same thing as CIT—right? You will train apprenticeships. Can you just help me out?

Mr Johns: We do the certificate III in electrotechnology. NECA is an industry association. We are also a group training organisation and an RTO. So we actually do the full certificate III and certificate IV qualifications to become a licensed electrician and sit through your capstone. We are identical to the TAFE, in as much as we do the same training courses. For example, Fiona sits on the Jobs and Skills Council, which develops the training packages. So we are essentially doing the same job, but we do it as an industry association and we are a not-for profit as well.

MS ORR: What are the opportunities that are there to all work together to meet this demand that we have out there?

Mr Johns: The biggest drawback we have to expansion and putting more apprentices are the actual capital infrastructure payments. For example, in Fyshwick, we built the facility ourselves. We had to save up the money and we had to support it through other states to subsidise those funds. We are a not-for profit industry association, so we are not flush with funds. If we can partner with government in providing facilities, we can expand; we can fit them out. They are the types of partnerships we are looking towards, because, to build a new facility for \$5 million, we do not have the balance sheet in the ACT to do it. There may be opportunities within TAFE facilities. We find, for example, if you go to a lot of TAFE facilities now, a lot is being done online and you do not actually have students sitting in the classroom. You cannot do electrotechnology do online. It is a very hands-on, monitored and specialised field, so we need additional facilities.

We actually came in here today to say thank you, because we were getting a lot less before. We were actually losing a substantial amount of money in training ACT students.

Because we are an industry association, we kept doing it, but we considered only training New South Wales kids in the Fyshwick campus, because we were losing that much money. This funding gap is actually something that we were desperate for. We would like to see it pro-rated back to the apprentices we have got going through now, because we are continuing to lose money on those. But infrastructure partnerships are what we are desperately looking for, and not just ACT. As I said, this is a national issue. Currently in Western Australia we train 50 per cent of all electrical apprentices.

Ms Scott: The shortfall in electrical apprentices is not something we can use immigration to solve. There are global shortages for electricians. There are, I think, two jurisdictions internationally, Kent, that have the same—

Mr Johns: Without additional training, we can usually only pull from Great Britain or Northern Ireland. That is the easiest way. Otherwise, it involves substantial training and you may as well start an apprentice.

MS ORR: So that is cross-accreditation of—

Ms Scott: Yes, which means that we do not really have that pool. So we really do have to grow our own apprentices through the school system and then through the education system to meet the shortfall, particularly when you look at all the major nation-building projects around the country—from the housing shortages through to transmissions lines through to different forms of energy generation, decommissioning some things and recommissioning other things. If you are going to have somebody plug in a solar battery, that is going to be an electrician. With every apartment block that is going to have to be recommissioned with some form of EV charging point, it is going to be done by an electrician.

It is an area that is in huge demand, and it is not an area where we can solve the shortfall through immigration. That is available in other trades, but it is not in this instance. We already have skill shortages and there is this big disparity between the ACT and the New South Wales, and providing this funding now is helpful.

We would be happy to invite the committee to come and visit our facility at Fyshwick to see what we do. It is a great hands-on facility with massive power poles in the car park. Apprentices learn to put them up, how to wire them up, how to wire them down and all of that sort of work, so that they are safe when they are doing everything, from building a transmission line to plugging in somebody's house.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time, unfortunately. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for your attendance today on behalf of the National Electrical and Communications Association. I do not think you have taken any questions on notice, but, if you have, could you provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. We appreciate you coming along today.

Ms Scott: Thank you.

Mr Johns: And we do extend that invite. If you want to come out and see the campus, we would be happy to take you out there and see all the sparkies.

Ms Scott: And you can meet some of our students and see them in action. It will give you a good example of the different types of training.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Short suspension.

CHAN, MS CARMAN, ACT Branch Chair, Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia, and Clinical Pharmacist at Canberra Hospital

CLEMENTS, MR JOSHUA, ACT Branch Vice Chair, Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia, and Resident Pharmacist at Canberra Hospital

THE CHAIR: We will now hear from the Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia, and we welcome Ms Carman Chan and Mr Joshua Clements. I would like to remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which you should have received by email. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and you agree to comply with it?

Ms Chan: I understand.

Mr Clements: I understand.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms Chan: Yes, absolutely. Today we are representing SHPA, the peak body of over 6,100 hospital pharmacists in Australia, along with their hospital pharmacy technicians and intern colleagues. I am a clinical pharmacist in the ACT public healthcare system, currently at the Canberra Hospital. The views today expressed are those of the SHPA and myself and should not be attributed to the Canberra Hospital.

Medicines are the most common health intervention, with up to 90 per cent of patients experiencing medication changes during their hospital stay. As the medication experts across diverse clinical specialties, hospital pharmacists must be present at every touchpoint to ensure safe and effective medicines management and optimised judicious use of medicines.

An Australian economic analysis indicated that clinical pharmacist services provide a \$23 return for every one dollar that is invested. But workforce shortages remain a key barrier to delivering high-quality services to the ACT. Ninety per cent of job applications for hospital pharmacist positions come from community pharmacists. But ACT hospitals lack the capacity to adequately upskill and train these community pharmacists to develop the skills necessary in an acute care setting.

A state-funded hospital internship program would address workflow challenges and build future workforce resilience, in line with the ACT Health Workforce Plan for 2023 to 2032. This is particularly important in the Canberra Hospital, as our ex-interns make up the majority of our current workforce. Investment in clinical education educators is crucial for expanding internship programs and supporting professional development. The lack of clinical educators who play a crucial role in the shaping of professional development of interns is directly tied to the capacity of hospital pharmacist departments to employ more interns.

With a growing and ageing population and an increase in chronic and complex conditions in the community, it is paramount to have a highly skilled workplace to support safe and quality services. However, ACT hospitals face pharmacist retention issues due to limited opportunities for progression, specialisation and advancing

practice. Expanding the SHPA's two-year registrar training program is vital for developing a highly skilled workforce. Currently there are only two registrar positions in the ACT. One is in the intensive care unit, which requires pharmacists to have an understanding of how medication management changes in those that are critically unwell, and one in antimicrobial stewardship, which optimises the use of medicines to minimise the risk of antibiotic resistance and reduce any adverse effects that a patient may experience.

In addition to recruitment and retention strategies that strengthen the pharmacist workforce, the ACT government should also consider ways to better utilise the hospital pharmacy technician workforce to free up the existing pharmacy and nursing workforces. Better utilisation of hospital pharmacy technicians can free up pharmacists and nursing staff, enhancing the overall care for our patients. Investment in technician led models, like bedside medication management model, can optimise medication safety and improve patient safety. The role of the ward-based pharmacy technicians in the bedside medication management model is to coordinate and streamline timely access to medicines, coordinate and maintain appropriate storage of medications and the removal of any ceased or unwanted medicines from patient care areas. Medication related admissions account for 2.5 per cent of hospital admissions within Australia. As the medication experts, hospital pharmacists play a vital role in—

THE CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Chan, but we are getting very short on time. In theory, there is only around five minutes left for us to ask some questions. Have you got much left?

Ms Chan: Okay. Sorry, I will just—

MS ORR: If you have the statement there, maybe you can just give the statement to the secretariat and we can accept it as an exhibit and we will then have the rest of what you were going to say.

THE CHAIR: It is just that we have more people waiting their turn. I am very sorry.

Ms Chan: I am also very sorry. I cannot hear you very well. I might need to let Josh take over, because everything is very faint. I am very, very sorry.

THE CHAIR: Okay; thanks. Can you give us an update on the progress of your recommendation for a ward-based pharmacy technician-led bedside medication management project across ACT public hospitals?

Mr Clements: At the moment we have different implementation for the technician workforce between the two major public hospital sites. At north Canberra they have started transitioning in that direction to wards, and that is mostly where the bedside management program will start. Effectively, at the moment, they do not have the capacity to offer it everywhere and, from my understanding, they have a limited ability to be able to provide that service and the savings that come with it.

THE CHAIR: How was the recommendation received by government? Have they been very supportive?

Mr Clements: From what I have been told, we have not received additional funding or any acknowledgement in that direction at the moment.

MS ORR: Can you talk us through the outcomes found in other jurisdictions or internationally for this model of the ward-based pharmacy technician-led project or the modelling behind it?

Mr Clements: In our submission we made reference to a study that was done to assess how efficacious it was in implementing the service. Looking at the patient safety component of it, there was an increase of about one per cent in reduced medication admissions. With over 2,367 episodes of administrations, that brought the admissions down by roughly 30. That may not seem like a lot but, in the acute care setting, where any missed medicine may acutely change the outcome, it is important that we do aim to bring that down as much as possible.

MS ORR: Is there a cost saving to the hospital service as a result of the pharmacy technician having this role within this model?

Mr Clements: Yes. There are a couple of different components that actually lead to the cost saving. The first and foremost is reduced nursing time having to focus on the sourcing of medicine. In a different study there was a reference to the hours. The Tasmanian Health Service had KPMG conduct a consultation into the implementation of this sort of service and identified that nurse staffing spent 1,526 hours each week on reactively managing medicines, and the technicians were able to help reduce that and streamline that.

MS ORR: Some of the other organisations who operate in a similar professional area have suggested that focusing pharmacy services on mental healthcare responses can be beneficial. I wanted to seek the views of your association on specialist pharmacy services for mental health treatment.

Mr Clements: One hundred per cent. Mental health services are always an area that we will push for pharmacists to be more involved in, because we know that, when a pharmacist is involved, the safety perspective is significantly increased. Canberra Health Services is pushing towards an advanced trainee registrar in mental health. That will help improve those services, with a specialised pharmacist able to provide acute, specific knowledge that may not be available elsewhere.

THE CHAIR: We will have to call it quits there; I am very sorry. On behalf of the committee I thank the Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia for appearing today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you again, and keep up the good work.

Mr Clements: I just wanted to say that, if you did have any questions that you wanted answered, we are more than happy to take them on notice outside of the meeting as well.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

GRIFFITHS, MR ROD, President, Conservation Council ACT Region
VEIKKANEN, MS FIONA, Executive Director, Canberra Environment Centre
MANCE, MS PAULA, Executive Director, SEE Change

THE CHAIR: We welcome Ms Paula Mance, Executive Director of SEE Change; Mr Rod Griffiths, President of the Conservation Council ACT Region; and Ms Fiona Veikkanen, Executive Director of the Canberra Environment Centre. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is on the pink sheet on the desk in front of you. Please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it. We will start at this end with Mr Griffiths.

Mr Griffiths: Yes; I agree with that statement and will comply.

Ms Veikkanen: Yes; I agree with the statement.

Ms Mance: Yes; I agree with the statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would any of you like to make a short opening statement? Remember that we do not have a huge amount of time. Paula.

Ms Mance: SEE Change is a registered environmental charity with some 650 financial members in the 17 auspice and community based volunteer groups. We have 10,000 Facebook followers and 3½ thousand subscribers. Today we want to talk about the fact that Canberra's environmental NGOs do not have a sustainable funding relationship with the ACT government, and we are disappointed that funding was not provided in the 2024-25 budget. Our 160 volunteers contribute more than 500 hours per month to the ACT economy, running repair cafes, the Community Toolbox and a range of activities and community based education to help Canberrans improve their sustainability.

Last year, the SEE Change network also contributed to many government consultations on increased urban housing development and sustainability, light rail, the circular economy, the food strategy, active transport and the carbon emissions strategy. The environment and climate are identified in one of the 12 domains of wellbeing in the ACT Wellbeing Framework, yet the environmental NGOs receive funding that supports less than one full-time-equivalent staff member. No funding is provided for rent, insurance, management of risk, regulatory compliance or to meet the cost-of-living pressures.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms Veikkanen: The Canberra Environment Centre is the ACT's oldest environment organisation. In the last 12 months alone, we have delivered over 129 workshops and events that delivered practical skills for sustainable living to 2,401 participants. These included activities like composting, bike repair, gardening, nature connection, textile repairs and energy efficiency advice, just to name a few. We also manage The ReCyclery, which is a second-hand bike workshop where we have repaired and redeployed 253 bikes in the last 12 months.

Current government funding covers less than one full-time staff member, and we can only run by chasing fee-for-service opportunities and applying for short-term inadequate grants. The Canberra Environment Centre has the capacity to deliver high-impact trusted community education and events, yet this is not going to be possible, ongoing, without appropriate funding. Inflation, insecurity of tenure, complexity of work and increased demand all require increased financial support. Without increased funding, we will not be able to meet community demand. We are here for increased funding so we will be able to increase our programs and contribute to a net zero emissions future.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Griffiths.

Mr Griffiths: We also put in a submission to the ACT budget. In our budget, we had six key items. One of those was championing local environment and climate organisations, which is similar to what we are talking about here. We also asked for investment in a safe climate—that is, electrification of the ACT—investment in safe, convenient and accessible transport; investment in the phasing out of wood fires as heaters; investment in biodiversity; and investment in invasive species management.

Similar to the other organisations, we are very small. We have 2.4 FTEs and we deliver a huge range of work with the 2.4 FTEs. We see ourselves as the voice of the environment. We are the peak environment body in the ACT and represent over 40 environment groups. We have been under severe pressure. I have been involved with this organisation since 1994. I have never had so much stress and have never seen my board so stressed about how we are actually going to survive a six-month period. We were very lucky that we had a very strong donation appeal at the end of the financial year. That will get us through for maybe another six months. It is going to be a real struggle for our organisation. We are delivering for all of the ACT. Like the other organisations here, we are not really able to generate significant funding through grants. We are very reliant on the funding that we get through the ACT government.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We will start with questions at the far end this time. Miss Nuttall.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. You have all spoken about insufficient resources and the intense strain that it puts on your organisations to function. Acknowledging that your organisations are funded for specific duties and grants, how do the current funding arrangements fail to account for the administrative burden when it comes to managing and coordinating large numbers of volunteers?

Ms Mance: For SEE Change, managing or not managing 160 volunteers is really a big issue. We have no money for training in support of volunteers. We turn away multiple volunteers every week because we do not have the resources to support them. Along with that, we are selecting demographics of volunteers that are very self-sufficient. We are not adequately supporting students and young people or people who might have vulnerability, because we just do not have the resources to give them a proper experience and an ethical experience. We do not have any money to pay rent, so we have insecure tenancy. We do not have any EAP or training budget for staff. You can see that is a really complex way to manage an organisation and it exposes us to a lot of risk.

Ms Veikkanan: I could add to that. For a lot of people who have time available to volunteer—say, during the day—there might be a reason they are not in a paid position and they typically need additional support. Similarly, we need to turn away volunteers because we do not necessarily have the support to wrap around those people. With additional funding and an additional community development role, we would be able to support far more volunteers in meaningful environment related activities.

Mr Griffiths: In the Conservation Council, we provide high-level technical advice to the community and also the ACT government. Volunteers have to be very well informed about the way the ACT operates. Volunteers for the Conservation Council have a quite knowledgeable position and, therefore, it is a restricted role for volunteers within our organisation. Basically, the real work falls on our staff. Think about 2.4 FTEs. That is not a lot of people. In relation to the Nature Conservation Act review, we produced a document of 30 or so pages. We probably produce a submission every week, and that is coming from just four part-time people. It is an amazing load of work. We need that skillset to be able to manage the work that we do to help the ACT achieve its environmental outcomes.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. I have a supplementary, if that is okay. Mr Griffiths, you touched on it nicely. How much does the ACT government currently lean on your organisations for community relationships with other organisations, consultation, and expert feedback on government policies and programs? And does any of the funding you have receive cover those activities?

Mr Griffiths: The ACT government does fund us for those sorts of activities. That is our *raison d'être*. We are here to put together the thoughts of our member groups and provide that to influence the decision-making of both policy makers and businesses. There is a significant role for us in that area. That is why we are talking about the expertise that we need to achieve the sorts of outcomes that we are actually funded for through the ACT government. We have a significant role with the ACT government. We co-chair the Biodiversity Conservation Forum, which is an idea that came from our member groups. It allows significant interaction between the community and the ACT government.

Ms Veikkanan: The Canberra Environment Centre would love to provide more advice and feedback to the government, although, with such a small team, it is difficult. Our focus is definitely on the community—people who want to take sustainability action and do not know where to start. A lot of the high-level-to-government component has been through the Conservation Council. That said, we have contributed and continue to engage with government on strategies, including the Canberra Region Local Food Strategy, the ACT Climate Change Strategy, the ACT Circular Economy Strategy, and the Active Travel Plan.

Ms Mance: SEE Change has the expertise to participate in the types of strategies and consultations that we are asked to participate in, but we have to prioritise. A part-time executive director could not respond to a fraction of what we are asked to respond to by directorates across the ACT government. In our contract, we have to participate in six forums. We would definitely exceed that every year, but we turn away a lot of requests as well. The average age of my staff, if you take me out of the equation, is 21.

To have the funding to be able to employ a more senior person who could participate in some of those consultations and bring the voice of community would be very beneficial, I would imagine.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. I have one more supp, with your indulgence, Chair. I think you have also touched on this one. With the current level of funding, how many years into the future do you think you would be able to continue to operate? You said earlier that it would be six months, but is that across the board?

Ms Mance: We will continue to operate because we are mainly a volunteer organisation, but we will be retracting what we can do. Just last week, the board decided that we would not auspice any more groups under SEE Change. We are completely overwhelmed. We want to be able to do at least a minimum level of quality support. So there will no growth for the organisation. With the expectations of government for regulatory compliance and things like that, plus rent increases and other cost-of-living pressures which are eroding our operational funding at an alarming rate, I imagine there will be some retraction of staff as a result.

Ms Veikkanan: Similarly, we can continue to operate, but the impact that we have is reducing. With things like increasing wages and increasing superannuation, the way we have to respond is by decreasing the hours of staff, even including me. That is what we are dealing with. We have to reduce the number of programs. In our forward planning for next year, I am reducing the number of events planned to deal with the funding pressure.

Mr Griffiths: In the council, we will see staff reductions in January when two of our staff go full-time after being university students. We are not planning to replace them, as a cost-saving measure. We have reduced the number of hours. We have just recruited a new executive director and we have reduced the number of hours the ED will be performing during the year. This all has an impact on our ability to provide a service to our member groups and the ACT government, and also the community in general.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MS ORR: Could I get a quick overview from each of you as to the requirements and obligations you have under your current funding arrangement? Ms Mance, you made reference to having to attend six forums a year. There are those sorts of things. What are you currently funded to do?

Ms Mance: We are funded for the moderate amount of activity that we have to do under our contract. It is a case of: what impact do you want the environmental organisations to have? If we reduced our services back to the minimum, the organisation would be a shell and what we would be providing to government would be well under what we need in the current climate crisis and what we are being asked to do in terms of bringing expertise and the voice of community to government. That minimum standard does not really—

MS ORR: Sorry, Ms Mance. That is not really the direction I was trying to go. You say more funding is needed. I am not quite sure what is being funded now and how big the gap is. I am also trying to get a little bit of an understanding—and this is my follow-up

question—about the type of funding. Do you have funding arrangements that say, “We’ll fund you to do X, Y and Z” and are quite prescriptive or do they say, “We’ll give you a little bit of a discretionary grant and you can go ahead and use it as you want”? These are the things I am trying to unpack to get a better understanding of what the response is.

Ms Mance: It is for six consultations and, I think, 10 activities per year.

Ms Veikkanan: I am happy to take that on notice and respond specifically. In the Canberra Environment Centre, our contract has some particular numbers—for example, 12 workshops, six consultations with government et cetera. Beyond that, a lot of it is about responding to volunteer demands, community needs and also the inbox that is full of questions.

THE CHAIR: In the interest of time, each of you could take that on notice and let us know so we can move on.

Ms Mance: Yes.

Ms Veikkanan: Yes.

MS ORR: Mr Griffiths, yours is quite different because you also have an advocacy role.

Mr Griffiths: Yes. It is specifically identified in our contract that we have to do that.

Ms Mance: Whereas ours is not like that.

THE CHAIR: Do you have a substantive question, Ms Orr?

MS ORR: Sure. Mr Griffiths, the financial picture you have painted is not a great one for the council, from what I have heard so far. I am trying to get a feel for how we have ended up in this space and what has led us to this. The government has provided a grant to you and it includes advocacy. If the grant has got us to this point but it is now not working, what has changed?

Mr Griffiths: It has been a gradual impact. There are little things. This year, we were required to put up our wages by 3.65 per cent and the grant went up by 3.6 per cent. It does not sound like much, but that little bit adds up over time. When the grants program initially came into place, grants were not indexed, so over time we have lost. Applying just the CPI sometimes does not cut it because things are actually going up greater than the CPI. Insurance is a great example of where things change significantly over and above a CPI increase.

MS ORR: When was the last time you had the appropriateness of funding reviewed? I know that within the community service sector there is a big commissioning program going on. They are looking at the sustainability of the sector. You are not necessarily counted as a community service group, so it might not be part of that project. I am trying to get a bit of a feel for the history and when it might have been last looked at. You are saying that there is a cumulative impact and that there are lots of different things. When did they sit back and ask, “Is this fit for purpose”?

Mr Griffiths: I do not recall it ever being assessed over the 10 years that we have had a grant—whether it is—

MS ORR: That was my actual question: when did it start?

Ms Veikkanan: I am unaware of it being assessed at any stage. I am not even sure how I would investigate that.

MS ORR: I have a final quick question, if that is all right, Chair. Government funding, grants and stuff, as you know—because you are already experiencing this—are usually tied to certain deliverables or outcomes. If there were a change in the amount of funding given to you, are you all open to looking at what that is tied to and what it provides for? We are not asking for blank cheques here, are we?

Mr Griffiths: That part of the negotiation. We have always had to negotiate. Each year, we negotiate what our outcomes are for that financial year. Sometimes we are not necessarily in a great bargaining position. There is much more authority, let's say, on the side of the government as they hold the purse strings and they make the final decisions, so we are not in a great bargaining position.

THE CHAIR: I will ask what I think is a very specific question. What impact does the pay for staff have, in terms of people moving on, insecurity of tenure, cost pressures et cetera?

Ms Mance: We never have sufficient funding to give people a long-term career in the organisation. My staff are almost always part-time university students. They stay while they are completing their course. We spend a lot of time building them up, mentoring and giving them a really good experience, but they normally go to the public service when they graduate, because they have a very good CV to demonstrate experience for their next career. There is a constant open-door turnover. It is expensive to recruit. It costs \$400 for an ad in Seek every time you have to advertise. We do not have \$400. It is like scratching for crumbs all the time when it comes to employment. As I mentioned before, we do not have money for training, so it is more about the support that we can give them within the office rather than sending them to any professional or expert training.

Ms Veikkanan: There is also the mental and wellbeing piece as well. It is incredibly stressful.

Mr Griffiths: When you look at what I, the board and the community demand from the executive director, you would expect that person to be an SES equivalent in their level of expertise. There is interaction with ministers, bureaucrats et cetera. You would expect someone to have a significant level of experience. We do not pay them for that. We do not pay them as a senior executive; we pay them at an executive level. If I were talking about the commonwealth, we would pay them at an executive level 1. The amount of expectation on our executive director is quite ridiculous actually, and that level of constant pressure and demand on their time makes it very, very difficult for them.

THE CHAIR: Mr Cain, do you have a question?

MR CAIN: I do. I will start with the Conservation Council and perhaps others can comment. I go mainly to your lobbying role and your position on the proposed development at the western edge. Does it have significant ecological and environmental value that would be damaged by development?

Mr Griffiths: Our position is that we need to have significant examination of the values out there. There are certainly values that we can see, not only of specific threatened species but also of the ability for those areas to actually achieve connectivity between other important areas of conservation. Our position in the council is that we are opposed to further greenfield developments. We think there are opportunities to achieve as much as we can by looking at non-greenfield developments and to work through those. There would be significant infrastructure costs associated with going out to areas that we are including in the western edge.

MR CAIN: Could you confirm that you believe there should be no greenfield developments?

Mr Griffiths: That is our policy.

MR CAIN: That is including what is happening in West Belconnen, in Ginninderry?

Mr Griffiths: No; that already exists. We are talking about future ones.

MR CAIN: What involvement has the council had in the western edge investigations? Have you been regularly consulted by the government?

Mr Griffiths: We work through the Biodiversity Conservation Forum to ensure that there is pressure on the government to undertake the required environmental assessments that should be happening. We believe that environmental assessments for all developments should happen before the planning actually occurs so that you can focus on the development. You identify the key things that need to be preserved and then you work your development around them. That is opposite to the way that it happens at the moment under planning. The planning goes in and then the environment is a secondary consideration.

MR CAIN: I have one final supp, if that is okay. How can the government achieve the balance between community needs for housing and conserving important ecological sites?

Mr Griffiths: We have significant years of community housing coming through West Belconnen. I also sit on the board of the Ginninderry Conservation Trust. It does not work in collaboration with the joint venture out there, but we know we still have 40 years of development to happen out that way. We can see that there is significant development happening—outside of what we are saying is the red line—within central Molonglo. So we have quite a few years before we are going to push the bucket on greenfield developments, but we are thinking about trying to work out the best ways to infill.

THE CHAIR: Time is at an end. SEE Change, Conservation Council ACT Region, and Canberra Environment Centre, thank you very much for your appearance today. If you have taken any questions on notice—for example, specifics about what you are doing for your funding—if could you provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*, that would be very helpful. Thank you again for your appearance today and thank you for all your work in our environment.

Mr Griffiths: Thank you for the opportunity.

Ms Veikkanan: Thank you.

Ms Mance: Thank you.

Short Suspension.

BOWLES, DR DEVIN, Chief Executive Officer, ACTCOSS
DOBSON, MS CORINNE, Head of Policy, ACTCOSS

THE CHAIR: We are pleased to welcome Dr Devin Bowles, CEO, and Ms Corinne Dobson, Head of Policy at ACTCOSS. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement which is the pink sheet on the table in front of you. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

Dr Bowles: I understand and agree.

Ms Dobson: I understand and agree.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr Bowles: No, thank you.

THE CHAIR: We will proceed straight to questions. I will start off. I have looked at the ACTCOSS ACT budget priorities submission, and particularly where you talk about community services. You said:

In addition to supporting those on the lowest incomes, many services are helping people who have never appeared at their doors before. Waged individuals and working families were draining their savings to keep a roof over their heads but cannot afford to put food on the table.

I know you expressed a similar concern during last year's hearings—that community organisations were struggling to keep up with demand. Can you outline where we are at now with these services on the ground? Are community groups still struggling to cope with demand? Specifically, are they continuing to see an increase in the number of working families accessing their services?

Dr Bowles: I wish I could say that the demand for services provided by the community sector had decreased, but that is not the information that I have. We continue to see an increased number of people accessing community services, including for emergency-type aid and food aid, including people who are in paid work. We are continuing to see a large number of people accessing services that they would not have accessed five years ago—and would not have imagined themselves accessing five years ago.

This has done a couple of things to demand. One is that it has obviously increased the proportion of people accessing the services. It has also, though, increased the complexity of clients that organisations are seeing. That is because where one person who might have been attending had one or two issues, the sustained economic pressures now mean that they are often presenting with several issues, each of which makes addressing the other issues more complicated.

MS ORR: Dr Bowles, I think you mentioned food relief and accessing food. This comes up quite a bit in many conversations anecdotally as an area where the increased demand is becoming quite apparent. I want to find out from you what you are hearing. Is it to do with food relief? In what other areas are people accessing services?

Dr Bowles: We are seeing it in a range of areas that are basically directly related to financial support. There are things like food; there are also things like financial counselling, and support for access to energy. Many people that used to be able to pay their energy or other utility bills without sacrificing other major aspects of their life are no longer in a position to do so.

That has flow-on effects, because the additional stress that those financial circumstances put people under leads to a whole series of other consequences. For instance, we know from the literature that sustained financial stress is not good for relationships. It is not good for mental health. Across the board I think the community sector is seeing an increased demand for what it is doing.

MS ORR: It almost follows logically from that that if you increase support within those areas—the crisis areas like food relief and housing—where you have not necessarily had the same level of demand, if people could start getting those services, it would uplift across the board because they would not necessarily be needing to go to those other services as a result of not being able to address the immediate need.

Dr Bowles: It goes some of the way. For many families, though, if they are at the point of accessing emergency food relief, especially if they are employed, their level of stress is really high. Making sure that they have enough food on the table is definitely helpful. But their level of stress is still much higher than it was five years ago. So it is a useful measure but it does not do everything.

Ms Dobson: As Devin says, emergency relief is broader than food relief. It is about providing all of those other types of financial and material assistance to people. One key pressure underpinning a lot of this—and we know it is one of the biggest areas of financial pressure for households—is housing. Particularly for those who are in the rental sector, it has been an ongoing source of financial pressure. When you add in the other cost-of-living pressures on households, that is creating a huge issue. We can look at one-off measures to try and ease that, but we need to have a longer term approach to that.

Even in the homelessness services sector, we must have the crisis support and we must have crisis accommodation, but we have limited capacity. We do not have the pathways into permanent housing. It is about providing things like case management and more sustained support. Particularly for individuals that have had all of these other problems with meeting their needs, and often the complexity of the issues they are grappling with have compounded, they need more ongoing support and currently the system is so stretched that the capacity to do that is really limited. We see people who might exit a service and they come back not long after. That really is not sustainable.

MS ORR: Dr Bowles and Ms Dobson, I have had many conversations with you over some of the stuff about sector sustainability and commissioning. I know those processes are still ongoing. I want to get a little bit of a steer from you as to where you think the sector is up to and how things are progressing.

Dr Bowles: The sector is at a really difficult point. There are a couple of things to understand, by way of background. One is that increased demand that we spoke about.

On top of that, I would note there are increased costs and regulation. For instance, we have seen increases to mandatory superannuation, which, of course, is a good thing, and long service leave payments. A number of insurance costs have gone up well ahead of inflation, and there have been regulation changes, such as to IR laws and secure local jobs.

Each of those factors puts additional strain on the sector. At the same time, because of the commissioning process, a number of organisations have been investing a lot of their effort into helping the government to make good decisions about where to make future investments. At the same time, they have been uncertain as to their own future. While they are advising government, they are doing so with the knowledge that they may not continue to be funded. They are strained in a number of ways.

One thing that is worth pointing out is that superannuation and long service leave increases are not accounted for in the government's indexation formula. For the wage component of indexation, we calculate that, over the last few years, long service leave and superannuation increases have increased by 2.65 per cent in a way that has not been compensated for at all. That is putting additional strain on the sector.

One other important driver has been population growth. This budget saw the government very wisely invest a great deal into infrastructure for the services that it provides. From memory—and this could be mistaken—there was something like \$100 million for future hospital development infrastructure. There has not been, though, an acknowledgment of population increase in the sector's work. Many organisations have been on contracts for 15 years or so and have not seen, beyond indexation, any accounting for the fact that they are expected to serve a Canberra population that is now 30 per cent larger than at the start of those contracts.

In the two weeks or so after the budget, I had confidential discussions with two NGO CEOs that talked about the possibility of winding up their organisations. The community sector as a whole is in a very difficult position, and in some places it is close to market failure. Market failure is important not just because organisations that we have all heard about might not exist anymore, but because it means that the ACT does not have the capacity, or would not have the capacity, to service fundamental needs that the community has.

Ms Dobson: Another additional part of that is the workforce across community services. It is a workforce that does really demanding and challenging work, but it is really important to the community. We struggle in our sector to offer competitive wages. We always struggle with the public sector. There is an ongoing decline in real terms. As Devin said, the difference, even if we just look at wages, between the wages component and the indexation means we are going backwards, year on year, in terms of the funding we receive. That just compounds the challenge of offering competitive wages to what is also a female-dominated workforce that undertakes work that has historically not always been valued in the same way.

With a sector that is not being funded effectively, it makes it very challenging to sustain and retain the workforce. We know there have been challenges across the labour market, and not just in our sector. I think those are compounded by the ongoing underfunding. It is something that we would like to see addressed, as part of offering fair wages and

conditions for workers in our sector—as I said, in a female-dominated industry.

MS ORR: Is it fair to say that you remain committed to the commissioning program and the sector sustainability program; you would perhaps just like them to progress a little bit?

Dr Bowles: I think that commissioning has a lot of potential, and it is absolutely the right and responsibility of government to ensure that the funds that ultimately come from the taxpayer are invested as wisely as possible. Overall, we would say that if our sector is funded slightly more than \$200 million a year, and the overall investment for most contracts is for seven or eight years, we are looking at roughly \$1½ billion of investment, yet the amount of investment in the commissioning process has not been commensurate at all.

The community sector, which is being called by government an essential partner in planning what is required for future delivery by the community sector, basically has not been funded at all for that planning. Within government, the teams that are charged with rolling out commissioning, which is conceptually difficult and requires coordination within large directorates and between directorates, are very small. Usually, when a person or a business invests a significant amount of money, you see much more thought and investment in how we are going to invest, and we are not seeing that here.

With the sector sustainability project, I would say that is another thing that has a lot of potential but it is not being realised. One area of particular disappointment for us is that that work was not funded in the budget beyond its lapsing in December this year. Government has indicated to the sector that that is one of the primary vehicles by which the sector will be funded more sustainably, but it has not come close to finishing its work and it is anticipating that the money will dry up.

To the extent that commissioning is also pointed to by government as a mechanism by which the sector can be funded more sustainably, there is very little evidence that we are seeing that commissioning is having that effect. Organisations are not feeling confident that they can put in bids that reflect their genuine costs and that those bids will be successful. Commissioning is not doing that really important job, either.

Ms Dobson: There have been a lot of commissioning processes underway, and they have all been a little bit different. In many of the subsectors the envelope for funding was fixed at the outset. Through the commissioning process, significant areas of need and shortfalls might have been identified. In addition, the government is looking, for example, to implement a more rigorous outcomes framework and data collection. The funding has been fixed, and that is an issue as well. Commissioning, with the way that it is done, can be done well or it can be done poorly, but we need to make sure that the funding that we are providing through that process actually matches what the community needs and what is needed to sustainably and effectively deliver services.

MISS NUTTALL: What is your view on the best approach to reducing harm from poker machines? In particular, does the ACT need a central monitoring system and what would the benefits be, either way?

Dr Bowles: Reducing harm from poker machines requires a variety of interventions.

To start with I will say that electronic gaming machines are not present in many US states. They are not an inevitable part of community life. If we are going to have them, though, a central monitoring system is a fundamental requirement for a number of harm reduction measures that can hang off that. That includes mandatory loss limits and required breaks in play.

One other thing that I would like to add is that reducing the number of electronic gaming machines is also a useful intervention. Because I come from a country that does not rely on them at all in most communities, it is really easy to envision a future for the ACT where they play a much less strong role, and that would be helpful as well. But until we get to that, a central monitoring system is basically the backbone of a number of harm reduction measures which would be effective right now.

MS ORR: On the funding question, while acknowledging that there is a bit of uncertainty with the different processes that are underway, a bit of my analysis showed that, in some areas—for example, mental health—there were some underspends and a lot of one-year contracts. Have you noticed this, and what is your response to that?

Dr Bowles: Commissioning has not proceeded at the pace that was initially hoped, and that has led to the government basically requiring a number of short extensions. That has been really disruptive for the sector. That has meant in practice that, as the end of contracts has approached, it has been clear that the government has not been in a position to go to procurement in a time frame that would allow the next contracts to be signed with sufficient overlap of the old ones.

Ms Dobson made some excellent remarks around workforce challenges that our sector has. These are really exacerbated when an organisation does not know what its future is, thinks that it will, and is then told, “Actually, you’re going to have to hold your breath for another six months or year.” To be honest, in that situation, a lot of capable staff look at the job market and its abundance of opportunities in Canberra and say, “Why am I sticking around?” Many do, because of the value of the work and their ability to see the change that they can bring to the community, but it is certainly a major disincentive, particularly for anyone looking at a mortgage.

THE CHAIR: We have to wrap it up there. Thank you very much for your attendance today. I do not think you have taken any questions on notice. Thank you again for appearing and for all of your work within our community sector. We will now suspend the proceedings for an afternoon tea break.

Hearing suspended from 2.42 to 3 pm.

HOLLOW, DR ROSEMARY, President, National Parks Association of the ACT
BARNES, MS JENNIFER, Treasurer, National Parks Association of the ACT

THE CHAIR: Welcome to this public hearing of the committee's inquiry into the Appropriation Bill 2024-2025 and the Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2024-2025. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is the pink sheet on the table in front of you. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and agree to comply with it.

Dr Hollow: Yes, I do.

Ms Barnes: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Dr Hollow: Yes, I will. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you in person our budget submission and other issues. I know you have had a number of conservation and environment groups present to you, and all of them are no doubt looking for additional funding to continue to operate.

What sets the National Parks Association apart from some of the other groups, aside from being one of the longest established environment groups in the ACT, is our broad range of activities. We offer walks, both bushwalks and urban walks. We get involved in work parties. In fact, we have one a month in Namadgi National Park, in cooperation with Parks ACT.

We have a very successful social presence on Facebook and Instagram, which enables not only those people who live outside of the ACT but those who live in the ACT and are not able to physically or for a whole range of reasons visit our parks to engage with our parks. We know we have a more popular and successful Facebook page than Parks ACT, from the number of hits we have had on various activities. We had the pleasure of Parks ACT actually imitating one of our postings about mountain bike trails on Mount Majura.

We publish field guides to ACT birds, trees and butterflies. We run research projects. We fund a scholarship at the Fenner School, which enables us to work with the younger members of our community and engage them in our committee and activities.

As mentioned in our submission, we do make a significant contribution to ACT health and wellbeing. We would very much like the support of the ACT government for our operational expenses to enable us to continue that contribution to health and wellbeing and to the protection and management of ACT parks and reserves.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. You do not have to talk about numbers—actual figures—but what would you be hoping that funding from the ACT government would enable you to achieve that you currently cannot or are struggling with?

Dr Hollow: At the moment we are covering what I have set out as operational costs from our donations that we receive and from our membership dues. We have had some

funding from ACT grants, for example, to cover website costs, and we have got funding for the Namadgi anniversary activities that are coming up. If we had funding from the ACT government to offset these costs, it would enable us to extend the range of activities.

Basically, the figures we included did not include the executive hours, such as Jenny and me, and we have oversight of all our activities at the moment. If we had the costs covered and we could extend, for example, our office manager's activities, then we would have time to extend our engagement to continue to build up younger and more diverse members. It would also give us time to focus on fundraising programs, which we have not done to date; to cover such activities as Indigenous engagement, which we, again, fund out of our activities; and to broaden our membership base in the community.

Ms Barnes: I just want to add to that, which is that, although Rosemary said we are covering our expenses, we are not exactly. Being Treasurer, I make that comment. Last year we made a loss of just under \$12,000 and this year we will make a loss of just under \$15,000. So we are not covering our expenses at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Which you cannot go on with forever.

Ms Barnes: Exactly. It means we are drawing on reserves.

THE CHAIR: Does your funding request specify the website? I guess my point is: how are you finding the reach and effectiveness of website versus social media?

Dr Hollow: Sorry?

Ms Barnes: How do we get the balance between the website and the social media?

THE CHAIR: Yes. How effective is the website, given that, over the years, social media would appear perhaps to be surpassing website?

Dr Hollow: I guess they are complementary but they are also separate. The website includes, for example, our bulletins. It includes details of guest speakers. Probably the most important function of the website is the calendar for bookings for activities, for walks and work parties so that people can register and we have all their details.

Social media would have a greater reach than our website. I guess the difference is—and I will let Jenny jump in as well—that I think we have got something like just under 7½ thousand followers on social media and the hits we get on various issues vary. It has got a much broader scope. People have to go to the website, whereas with social media you are scrolling through Facebook or Instagram. What is interesting, because I take what I call the urban walks around Canberra, is the number of people who come on those walks and then join. They have not been members. I say, “Where did you find out about it?” and they say, “On Facebook” or “On Instagram.”

Ms Barnes: The website is our authority, really. It demonstrates our authority and experience. It has our constitution and quite a bit of history. In fact, the more mature members will go and dig into our history and look at past articles. It has got all our bulletins and newsletters, so it is almost our physical operating space, except that it is

not physical. We have a tiny office shared with the Conservation Council, which we support through a personal donation, but really it is a website that establishes us.

MS ORR: Can I just clarify: do you currently receive any government funding?

Dr Hollow: No; only from grants we have applied for. We have never had ongoing or what I call operational funding.

MS ORR: What is the amount that you are asking for? Forgive me; I think it was in here somewhere.

Dr Hollow: It is \$17,000.

MS ORR: Over a year, just to help. That would be to help with a little bit of the administration, the volunteers—

Dr Hollow: Basically, I itemised it as: office support, \$7,000; bookkeeping, \$1,600; IT support, \$3,800; and insurance, \$4,800. Jenny and I were talking, and insurance is actually a pretty major expense for us, which we have to have

MS ORR: That is because you do the bushwalks.

Dr Hollow: We have it through Bushwalking NSW, so it is obviously a reasonable rate. In fact, we totalled it up and our insurance costs come to about \$6,000 a year. That is a non-negotiable expense.

MS ORR: So this funding would go towards helping with your bushwalking program, recruiting volunteers, supporting volunteers, organising content for members.

Dr Hollow: Yes, and processing of new memberships. It is obviously pretty crucial that, when people do join, they get turned around immediately, welcomed and given information on activities coming up and how to sign up.

Ms Barnes: The other thing that we feel is missing but that we do not really have the capacity to address is people who have more demanding needs. We recognise that there is a strong need there, but we need to have people with the right management skills, health management skills and safety skills. You would not want to throw anyone into that position. We recognise the demand, but we do not have the capacity to respond to it.

MS ORR: When government provides funding to groups it is usually because there is something in the public interest or a return to the government in what is being offered. Can I get a bit of a better understanding as to how you already work with government and how that relationship can be strengthened or improved through funding?

Dr Hollow: With the grants we have had from the ACT government under the environment funding, there is always, as with all grant applications, fairly significant in-kind support required. We have been able to demonstrate, with our research project, very significant in-kind support through the amount of work that volunteers do.

In terms of working with government, we have meetings—in fact, we had one last week—every two or three months with Parks ACT, with their managers, to talk about areas of interest and areas of concern to us. Our advocacy work has always been a very important part of what we do. In fact, it was set up to get a national park established in the ACT, which it did with Namadgi. We continue to talk to Parks ACT and the managers at—I always get the initials wrong—EPSSD or whatever it is.

THE CHAIR: We know who you mean.

Dr Hollow: One of our biggest concerns at the moment is the lack of an Indigenous ranger program, so that is one of the issues that we continue to talk to them about.

Ms Barnes: Can I just clarify: did you mean what have we been using the grants for?

MS ORR: No, no, no. I sort of meant that, usually if government provides funding, for example—

THE CHAIR: Ongoing funding.

MS ORR: With ongoing funding you will run X number of activities and this many programs and you will provide advice on that. I just wanted to get an understanding of what you might—

THE CHAIR: Comment on legislative changes.

MS ORR: Legislation; yes. I just wanted to get an understanding of what you might already be doing.

Dr Hollow: We run work parties in Namadgi once a month. We run walks every weekend in ACT parks, either around town or out of town. We just recently put in two submissions on the review of the Nature Conservation Act and the review of the Water Strategy. We have got the bushfire people coming to talk to us in November, as part of the consultation on the bushfire strategy. We made comments about the inadequacy of the survey on invasive species, which is why we did not put in a submission. We thought it was a survey that lacked the required content and information about ACT invasive species. We are very much involved in engagement through activities, through submissions.

Ms Barnes: And speakers.

Dr Hollow: Guest speakers. We have regular meetings with Minister Vassarotti every two or three months to raise issues of concern, as I have talked about. It is a pretty good relationship and regular contact. For example, Don Fletcher made a submission on the status of dingoes last September, which I think has helped inform the policy review of the status of dingoes in the ACT. There is our goanna research project. When it operates, during the summer, we certainly have ministers come out for photo opportunities with goannas.

Ms Barnes: One more point is that we do not just focus on the ACT. We have also made a submission to the New South Wales government about the control of horses in Kosciuszko.

MS ORR: Yes, because it impacts on the ACT.

MISS NUTTALL: If you do not mind me asking, what is your current view, if you do have one, on the condition of fire trails throughout the ACT and in our national parks?

Dr Hollow: I understand it is improving. We have certainly made, probably in the last 18 months to two years, representations to the ACT government about the condition of the roads in the ACT. We in fact organised a field trip to show a whole lot of people what we were talking about. My understanding is that—I have not been out there—they have spent a considerable amount of time and effort and changed contractors in order to improve the fire trail access.

Ms Barnes: It is probably an area of growth for us too because there is the recent interest in mountain bike riding amongst members. I think we will be getting more direct feedback, going forward.

MISS NUTTALL: Absolutely. You mentioned mountain biking. Is your primary role supporting the volunteer groups who wish to set up smaller trails? Is it providing trails yourself?

Dr Hollow: No. We are the group that leads a variety of activities in parks. Just in the last six months a member came and said, “I can no longer go walking in parks, but I can ride a mountain bike in parks, on tracks that are approved for mountain bikes. Would it be acceptable if we added mountain bike rides to our activities programs?” We said, “Sure,” and they have actually been quite popular. The first one he led at Mulligans Flat, and we had one of the rangers come along with us. Building on what Jenny said, we are very much about providing a range of activities to make the parks accessible to as many people as possible.

Ms Barnes: But certainly there is nothing about making new trails.

Dr Hollow: No.

MISS NUTTALL: But the works parties are very much working with Parks and Conservation?

Dr Hollow: Yes.

MISS NUTTALL: So that is the place in government that you would go to to get the trails set up and checked for safety and things like that?

Dr Hollow: We only use trails that are already approved by Parks for mountain bikes.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes; got you. Thank you. I appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: Continuing on that theme of fire trails and access, a couple of years ago I went on a drive with the group. I think Mr Gentleman was there. It was highlighting the damage done by the bushfires. Have you seen much improvement? Has some of the damage to the crossings et cetera been fixed?

Dr Hollow: I know there has been some improvement, like the entry to the Naas Valley. I am just trying to think of the road name. That is where a lot of our goanna research was being done and cameras were set up. It got to the stage of being totally inaccessible. It is the back road through the Naas Valley. I cannot think of the name of it. Anyway, apparently that has been fixed and they have been going in and checking some of the cameras there.

THE CHAIR: Have you noted much erosion et cetera going on, as a result of the bushfires?

Dr Hollow: I think it was huge, yes. As I said, I think Parks had a problem with the contractors they initially employed, who had experience in road maintenance but not in national parks.

THE CHAIR: With your educational programs and community awareness, I am sure—I will not put words in your mouth—there is community appetite. There are a lot of people who are interested in going on walks and learning more about the national parks. How do you promote what you do and attract new members?

Dr Hollow: I would say social media is our main avenue at present for doing that. I think there is probably scope to do more. We have talked with our Fenner School students about working with Intrepid Landcare. It really comes back to the capacity to do that, like Jenny says. I have had brief discussions with Ginninderry about working with the café, which works with migrant women, about opportunities there.

THE CHAIR: Stepping Stone?

Dr Hollow: Yes. Again, it comes back to capacity. In the last two years we have had about 100 new members a year, which is not a bad number. It is still going up. I am not sure to what extent we track where all the new members come through, but I know from the new members I have met at meetings and on walks that they have found us through Facebook and word of mouth.

Ms Barnes: Yes. Because we also fund scholarships with Fenner School honours students, there is word of mouth from that aspect as well.

THE CHAIR: Is your social media managed by a volunteer or a committee member or—

Dr Hollow: Volunteers and community members. Allan, who is—

THE CHAIR: Volunteers?

Ms Barnes: A very busy one.

Dr Hollow: Sorry?

Ms Barnes: There are a few.

Dr Hollow: We have a few people who run our Facebook page and volunteers. Allan, who is on our committee, is our promotion and outreach convenor. He coordinates it, and we have got a couple of people who do it at the moment. We are always looking for new people. They enjoy doing it and do a great job.

Ms Barnes: Yes; they do a great job.

THE CHAIR: It can suck up a lot of time.

Dr Hollow: I think once you are trained on how to do it, which I am not and Jenny is not—we have enough to do—it is okay. It is about getting people who are interested. The main person who is doing it at the moment, who has got a full-time job, said, “Oh, it’s fun. I do it before work and check it after work.” He is someone who has always done volunteering in the community. We are lucky enough that he joined us, only about two or three years ago.

I am keeping an eye on the time. In terms of the time to do other things, one of the things we do is follow up with new members to see if they have particular areas of interest. For example, if they want to go on work parties, I send them the details.

THE CHAIR: What is the age demographic of your membership? You mentioned that you have the Fenner School scholarship, helping to reach younger people, but how do you find it generally? Is it an older demographic?

Dr Hollow: Yes, it is. This is my second year as president. Since I have been president I have been very conscious not just of the overall membership age bracket but of the overall membership of the committee. I did drop it by about 30 years, and we are aiming to keep it lower. We have got younger members on the committee as well because they bring different ideas and experience.

Ms Barnes: From the conversations I have had with the younger ones on the committee, they are also building up skills that would be difficult to acquire at their early stage of employment, so it does work both ways.

MISS NUTTALL: We have been hearing from other organisations that sometimes you have to prioritise volunteers that are self-sufficient, and so sometimes it can be harder to bring on board volunteers with additional support needs. Is bringing on young people who are still early in their career a challenge that you have found?

Dr Hollow: Sorry?

MISS NUTTALL: Is it a challenge to bring on board new volunteers that might have higher support needs, might be seeking to gain experience but might not necessarily have training up front and things like that?

Dr Hollow: I would say our younger volunteers have—

Ms Barnes: I think the other thing is that, basically, we are very happy if people want to contribute any of their time. We appreciate that. Really, we cut the cloth according to what is available.

Dr Hollow: We are happy to provide whatever support. The breadth of activities we have got provides a range of opportunities. I have had one meeting and I have got another meeting set up with a couple of recent volunteers. One is in their mid-20s and one is in their mid-50s. The mid-50s person is an extremely experienced documentary filmmaker who is now based in Canberra. The mid-20s person has got parents in France who are filmmakers and they are both keen to help. We want to get some clips done for social media, as part of fundraising. We are bringing them together and saying, “Okay, guys, this is what we want. Can you go and do it?” The breadth of members makes it a really interesting mix at times.

Ms Barnes: Everyone is busy or has constraints of some variety, so it is about cutting the cloth according to what works.

THE CHAIR: I know many organisations do struggle with volunteers in the era where a lot of things are online rather than in person.

Dr Hollow: We can always have more people to contribute to the organising, but we do pretty well overall. We put out calls and sometimes get responses. I put out calls for people to form a subcommittee for the anniversary activities at Namadgi, and it has been great. One is off organising an exhibition. Another said, “How about we have Lions do the barbecue? I know someone in Lions Club.” Great. One of them is committee member; the other has not been. Another said, “I can’t do much, but I would really like to organise a birthday cake.” Great.

It is about having time to engage with the members, basically. It comes back to: if we have secure funding for the office and the other stuff then I do not have to think, “Okay; I have got to do some more fundraising or I have got to do this or I have got to do that.” I can spend more time with the members and volunteers that are joining us.

MISS NUTTALL: I think you have already touched on this. Is it sustainable for you to provide the current level of advice that you do to government? I understand that your priority is community volunteer engagement. Would you ideally provide a greater level of advice but you are limited by that capacity?

Dr Hollow: Probably, yes, we are limited by the capacity, but if there are issues that we really think government should be addressing then we will provide that advice. We do not expect them to always like our advice, because that is not what we are about. A lot of us are ex-government. Jenny and I worked in environment and agriculture. We have a lot of ex Australian government and ACT government and Parks ACT members. Part of the advantage, when you are a member of an organisation like NPA, is that you can make the comments you could not make when you were in government. We can sometimes ask the difficult questions and give them some challenges.

Ms Barnes: I think a number of people would like to make more in-depth comments, but they are often constrained by time. There could also be competing input: do we put

effort into the water one or do we put effort elsewhere? It is about balancing our capacity to respond. Certainly, we see it as a priority role in making—

Dr Hollow: Submissions.

Ms Barnes: We bring the grassroots view of what is happening or the very well informed view, because some members have got lots of experience and expertise.

MISS NUTTALL: I imagine; yes. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance today and for answering our questions. I do not think you have taken any questions on notice, so you do not have to follow up with anything. Thank you very much for coming in and meeting with us today. Keep up the good work.

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

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon. Thank you for coming in. I would like to remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is the pink sheet on the table in front of you. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply.

Ms Evans: I do.

Ms Thompson: I do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Do you wish to make an opening statement?

Ms Evans: Yes, please; if we can.

SupportLink provides a fully managed referral service to the AFP for ACT Policing. The pathways include referrals for individuals and families seeking assistance for a range of issues, including family breakdown, homelessness, dispute resolution, victim support advocacy and more. We have been working alongside ACT Policing for the last 27 years. We welcome the opportunity to speak with the committee today about two areas our coordination unit have identified as significant long-term service gaps in the ACT.

The first is support for women. For many years woman who were generally having a difficult time, due to a range of issues, were referred to the Women's Information Referral Service. This agency offered women a safe, nonjudgemental space to talk through their challenges and assist them to identify and access additional support as needed. This service closed in 2013. At that time we were assured that alternative service options would be made available. This has not been the case and this has been an ongoing challenge for our service.

While we partner with wonderful services in our community that are available to women, these are often funded in specialist areas, such as family violence, drug and alcohol, mental health and legal support. It has become increasingly challenging to facilitate general support for women who do not fit within these specific categories.

SupportLink would also like to thank the standing committees for both the inquiry into dangerous driving and the inquiry into immediate trauma support services in the ACT. We have been advocating for a trauma response service to support the ACT community for many years. We have seen firsthand the benefits of this model and the significant gap that has been left since the service ceased operating. We acknowledge the well-informed and comprehensive report recently released and, following that inquiry, echo the statements of the committee members.

There are, indeed, significant and immediate gaps in the need for specialist trauma support in our community. Such a service would be of immense value to people who experience a traumatic incident, as well as alleviating pressure on our emergency service responders. The model recommended for the ACT has already been trialled over

a 10-year period, with a vote of successful outcomes. We are fully supportive of the recommendations in both reports that the ACT government urgently implement a trauma support service in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: I am curious. I appreciate that this is not specifically in the two areas that you have identified, but what are the main two pieces of feedback you are hearing from young people in the course of your work about the state of youth mental health and youth wellbeing in your area?

Ms Thompson: We rarely have contact with clients ourselves. We are more facilitating the referral to the end service providers, to prevent people from having to retell their story. We certainly, for many years, were finding it difficult to link people in these services. We are finding that since MindMap have come on board that has been a really valuable referral point for us because they are able to have a conversation with the young person. A lot of the time, when the young person comes into contact with police, what police are referring them for may not be the issues that they are living with. Being able to have a conversation with a nonjudgemental, trained youth coordinator and then being offered active hold if they are not able to get support immediately has been really valuable, from our point of view.

Ms Evans: We have certainly found those models—the MindMap model, the Head to Health model and the model we referred to as the Women’s Information Referral Centre—helpful. That is the model where an agency will pick up a phone without specific criteria in mind and say, “What is happening for you? How can we help you?” They listen to that conversation and then help the person navigate the best service outcome. They are the services where we appreciate that sort of delivery the most.

MISS NUTTALL: Absolutely. In that case, would you say that MindMap is a useful model for a more generalised women’s information service?

Ms Evans: Absolutely.

MISS NUTTALL: That is really good to know. Thank you. Are there specifics when it comes to a women’s referral line? Are there particular things that you really want? Would you want it to be 24/7, for example? Would you want to make sure it was culturally safe?

Ms Evans: I think the models that we are seeing the most success from are what we said: Health to Head and MindMap. EveryMan provide an amazing service and we would be lost without them. We need a generalised business hours contact number where the agency can initiate contact with somebody and then discuss what other services they might either provide themselves or refer on to if the needs are outside the scope that they deliver.

Ms Thompson: It is that “no wrong door” model. Even if they cannot fit into that service, it is about still being willing to pick up the phone, rather than people having to, in times of really high distress, navigate those systems themselves.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MS ORR: Can I just clarify that to understand the process of a referral. The AFP contacts you and makes a referral, and then you work with the case to link them up to services. Is that it in a nutshell or have I missed something?

Ms Evans: The AFP use SupportLink for a lot of their operational work. They use SupportLink because we have a secure four-factor authentication database. They use it for child protection reports, restorative justice, drug and alcohol diversion, abandoned vehicles, domestic animal services—all of those things. When a police member comes in contact with someone from the community, either attending a job or at the front office, part of what they say is, “Can we offer you any additional support?” in relation to the matter they have come to police for.

We have determined over the years that about 80 per cent of the reasons people come in contact with police are outside of the law enforcement need. They are more of a social support need, so it is our job to find the best service in the community that is funded to deliver that support and for that service to reach out and make contact directly with the client, following the engagement with police. Police use our system from their mobile phones or their laptops or desktops, fill in the templates that we have designed between us, and the referral goes directly to the end service provider, but it is overseen by a referral coordinator to make sure that that is the best service.

MS ORR: Is it just the police making referrals or do you take referrals from other groups?

Ms Evans: No; we are funded by ACT Policing.

MS ORR: You have come to us saying that there should be a female-specific option there. I think the way you characterised it was: while there are a number of specialist services, there are more general needs that are not being met. Can I get a bit of a better understanding of what some of the gaps might be?

Ms Evans: I will hand that to Mel. She manages all the referral pathways.

Ms Thompson: General support for women, non-crisis, seems to be our second or third most commonly used support category by police. I think in the last 12 months alone there were around 500 that were referred. Police are coming into contact with women for various reasons, but it is unlikely that they will know the full story. That woman may not disclose what is happening for her. She may disclose, but there is limited time to really tease that out or there may be a number of issues, like comorbidity, occurring.

It is about being able to find a service that will just sit with that woman and find out from her what her needs are. That might be in her role as a carer, or it may come out during that conversation that there is some family violence present that she had not identified before or had not felt able to disclose in that initial conversation. There may be legal issues; there could be financial ones. It is quite broad, and a lot of the time it is interlinked.

MS ORR: I am still trying to get a better understanding, because you said “general

female support”, but I am still not quite sure. You mentioned caring responsibilities. How does it differ from general support? How is it gender specific? That is the bit I am trying to get my head around.

Ms Evans: I think what we see as the difference for us is that we have EveryMan, which is a funded service that has been delivered for a long time. They will pick up anything from the family breakdown to having difficulty at work with an employer to looking for a new job—any issue—and help pull that apart to decide what sort of support is needed. We do not have general support for women. The Office for Women originally took on the Women’s Information and Referral Centre contract, but they will not accept referrals unless it is related to something specific, so anything that sits outside of that, such as generally having some difficulties around—

MS ORR: So anything that is not one of the specific things—

Ms Evans: Yes.

MS ORR: Okay. Now I understand.

Ms Evans: They might not necessarily identify themselves, when they first come into contact with police, as being a victim of family violence or any of those things. That might start to evolve. A general conversation about what is happening can often lead to the right referral pathways to get that early intervention in place.

MS ORR: The situation, then, is that women are presenting with needing connection to support services. They might not fit into the designated ones and there is nowhere to refer them.

Ms Evans: Yes, and the police will say they are having a really difficult time at home with family relationships or parents or children or partners, or they are looking to get back to work, or they are just having a hard time. We have very limited referral pathways.

MS ORR: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: I think when you talked about the range of things that you refer people for, you talked about abandoned vehicles; is that right?

Ms Evans: Yes.

THE CHAIR: What kinds of referrals do you need for abandoned vehicles?

Ms Evans: Our role is to streamline the operational work for police. One of the things that they do is make a notification to city rangers when there is an abandoned vehicle. They log into our system to do all of those primary roles that they have to achieve in their day-to-day operations. Our work is to find out what it is that police need and then to streamline those outcomes. That is all abandoned vehicles reports, for example, but also restorative justice notifications, drug and alcohol diversions to ACT Health—all of those operational things, in addition to the social support referrals.

THE CHAIR: It is helping to reduce some of the administrative demands on police; is that what you are saying?

Ms Evans: Yes. I guess it is a matter of time-and-date stamping all of the actions that are being put in that police need to do, and then getting an outcome from those, rather than it going through an email. It used to go through a fax or a phone call.

THE CHAIR: If I was a member of the public reporting an abandoned vehicle, would I go through Fix My Street or would I report it to the police?

Ms Evans: You would go straight through Fix My Street and then through Access Canberra. If police come across a vehicle and they need it removed, they will put in an abandoned vehicle report and that triggers the city rangers to then pick that up. It is just streamlining it for the members.

THE CHAIR: Interesting. Miss Nuttall, do you have another question?

MISS NUTTALL: Not off the top of my head. That has answered a lot of what I had. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Orr?

MS ORR: Because we do not have a submission to work from, I have to ask lots of clarifying questions, so bear with me. Can I check: you are not asking for funding for a service. You are asking that, in the response the government makes, a general referral is considered; is that correct?

Ms Evans: What we are identifying is that, particularly in those two areas, we are fully supportive of all of the reports that have come through for the trauma support services, and we agree completely with the outcomes of those reports and the recommendations.

MS ORR: They were the two committee reports that you referenced?

Ms Evans: Yes. In relation to the support for women, it is just highlighting the fact that, from our perspective, there are a large number of women who do not get an immediate support response. We do not feel there needs to be funding for a new service; we just wonder whether there is any scope within existing services that could be broadened to provide general support for women.

MS ORR: Great. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your appearance today. I think we have all learnt something new that we did not know before. I do not think you have taken any questions on notice. Thank you very much for coming along.

Ms Evans: Thank you for having us.

VENTURA, MR FRANCIS, Chief Executive Officer, Kidsafe ACT
JONES, MS CARLEY, Executive Officer, ACT Playgroups

THE CHAIR: Welcome. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement on the table. Ms Jones, you would have had that emailed to you. Can you confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it.

Mr Ventura: I understand and agree to comply. Thank you.

Ms Jones: I understand and I also agree to comply.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would either of you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Ventura: Happy for Carley to go first.

THE CHAIR: Ms Jones, off you go.

Ms Jones: Thank you. I would like to start by acknowledging that we are meeting on the lands of the traditional people today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to start with a thankyou for the opportunity to speak to you today. ACT Playgroups has been around for 51 years. This is our 51st year of service.

We provide four main components. We support over 200 playgroups that are led by parent-led volunteers across the ACT region. We support a suite of what we call early support playgroups. They are designed for a child or a parent who may be experiencing additional needs. We provide the ever popular Paint and Play playgroup program. That is a free drop-in style playgroup held across the Canberra region. We work with the new parent groups provided by the MACH support service. We support them to transition as a whole to a playgroup, or individual families to access their local playgroup. I will stop there and give Francis a turn.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Ventura.

Mr Ventura: Thank you kindly. Firstly, thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today and thank you for making the time. I also pay my very sincere respects to elders past, present and emerging. I am very grateful to be here in the beautiful Canberra region, or Kambri region, which has been looked after for tens of thousands of years. Indeed, the least that we can do is to help maintain that. We are very appreciative of local young people in particular, emerging leaders of country, and also those who have come to Canberra.

I say to the ACT government that, as an organisation, we are in the fight of our lives. I say to Canberra's children that, as Kidsafe, we are in the fight for your lives. As a father to a beautiful boy, Luciano, this is now personal to me. We believe that every child should have the chance to grow up free from injury, serious injury, and stay out of an emergency room. Our goal is simple: for Canberra to be the safest place to be a kid and the best place to raise a kid.

Canberran children will be returning to school tomorrow. Sadly, evidence shows us that, every year, 150 children across Australia will be killed by entirely preventable accidents. On that basis, around six dozen children across the country, tragically, will not be alive by the end of the year, due to entirely preventable accidents.

The ripple effect of trauma is severe. Around 50 per cent of parents and carers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, following serious injury to their child. Lost study time for children has an impact on their academic and social skills, as well as their mental health. A study found that transport-related injuries were one of the costliest injury mechanisms, along with falls. Despite this, and astoundingly, neither Transport Canberra nor the Motor Accident Injuries Commission provide any support for Kidsafe to help keep kids safe in the car. A professor of trauma and emergency nursing said that a strategy to prevent injuries would be “a brilliant investment”. Conversely, I believe that a failure to do so is a dangerous act of negligence.

Fortunately, we have developed a positive vision, through modest funding proposals, that would directly contribute to the health and safety of kids. Before anyone says that extra recurrent funding cannot be found, a communications firm was recently awarded \$1.5 million to provide advice to bureaucrats, on top of the millions already spent on dozens of media advisers, while we are asking for, among other things, just \$50,000 to deliver safety education programs in schools.

The ACT government could, respectfully, have two fewer spin doctors and Kidsafe could be funded properly. Enough is enough. We should no longer have to convince, respectfully, politicians and bureaucrats of the importance of programs to literally keep children alive and safe, especially when they will save money and resources in an already strained healthcare system. We need support, especially to reach families and children on the north side, particularly Gungahlin, the new “nappy belt”—those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as those from migrant and low-English-speaking families. Roundabout Canberra has seen a 50 per cent increase in one year alone in the demand for car seats, particularly for families that cannot afford them.

It is the expectation of Canberrans that Kidsafe is funded properly, made clear during a recent outpouring of support. I will be clear: to consciously underfund Kidsafe is to knowingly place our beautiful children at risk. Let us take this as an opportunity to work together and make Canberra an even better place for families. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. You have touched on this, but back in May we saw an article in the *Canberra Times* entitled “‘At breaking point’: Much-loved Canberra charity could be forced to close”, where you outlined how insufficient funding has affected Kidsafe. Can you tell us more about the success of your attempts to increase government support for Kidsafe at that time?

Mr Ventura: I have to note a few people by name. We had very productive meetings with Leanne Castley, as well as Mark Parton, Jo Clay and Emma Davidson. We had a cordial meeting with the transport minister, Chris Steel. We had a few conversations with the health minister’s advisers. Despite a number of attempts, we were unable to get a meeting with Minister Yvette Berry’s office to discuss specifically the education program. We would obviously love to talk to her about that. We have tried. We have

met people from ACT Health.

We have made the very simple point about the funding that we get: while we appreciate it, we need more so that we can do more. We are not just some kind of added bonus to the community that does nice things. We are providing a critical, essential service to the community. We are a service that could be brought in house. This is a service that could be provided by the ACT government. It would cost more. We are trying to keep kids alive so that those kids can go on to live happy and healthy lives, and to prevent trauma for families. This would also save significant costs elsewhere in the economy; namely, the healthcare system. That is basically what we are trying to do. We have tried.

We have had some very productive meetings with others, but I will be honest that it gets a little bit demoralising after a while when you are having conversations with people and you say, “Our mission is to keep people alive; we are not asking for much,” and yet essentially it is brick wall after brick wall. In context, what we are requesting particularly, as I emphasised, will save money elsewhere. We are not asking for much. We are asking for support so that we can go out and do more for the community.

THE CHAIR: You did have a little success after you had your message in the media, in that Minister Stephen-Smith announced that one-off payment of \$59,000. What sort of message does it send to community organisations such as your own when the government will only support you after being publicly shamed?

Mr Ventura: I felt a little bit uneasy when we went to the media, because I am not a lobbyist; I am not an activist. I am trying to rescue a small charity that tries to keep kids alive. For decades it has had the runs on the board at quite literally keeping kids alive. When we had to go public we made the decision that this is a matter of public interest. The community needs to know. Again, it is not because we are trying to rabble-rouse or because I am an activist or a protester or anything like that.

It is a matter of public interest. Those with small children, in particular, need to know that Kidsafe was and still is on track to close by next year if our recurrent funding is not just continued but increased. We do that with a heavy heart. When I assumed this role, I did not think to myself, “I am going to go and do this.” But what it did lead to in response was people coming forward, signing a petition to keep Kidsafe, and also sharing with us their beautiful experiences that they have had with Kidsafe. Some were quite beautiful but emotional pieces of feedback about how they came to Kidsafe stressed, overwhelmed, not sure of what to do, and Kidsafe was able to provide them with the services that they needed to keep their children alive. I personally did not want to have to do that, but it got to a point where, as a matter of public interest, we had to go out and make that known to the public.

MISS NUTTALL: For both of your organisations, what is the risk to the Canberra community if your organisation stops functioning? What significant gap would that leave?

Mr Ventura: I will not talk too much, because I know Carley will share some important things about Playgroups. I will be very blunt, and this is not an exaggeration: more kids will get injured and killed. That is the long and the short of it. More kids will get injured and killed. In particular, they will be disproportionately children from socio-

economically challenged backgrounds, those from migrant backgrounds and low-English-speaking backgrounds.

As I mentioned, Roundabout Canberra has had a 50 per cent increase in requests for car seats. I gave a speech in Queanbeyan just last week. I know Queanbeyan is outside the ACT, but, as a case in point, that was at the Queanbeyan Multicultural Centre. There were about 15 or 20 parents there. Every single one of them had an incorrectly installed car seat. With all of the information that we shared about button batteries, the need to tie TVs to the floor, and basically the whole spectrum of information that we have to offer, in order to keep kids alive, they had zero understanding about it.

We say that we want to keep kids alive. We do not want the next part of that equation to be that it is only for kids who can afford it—only for Canberran families who can afford to go and purchase a seat and get it safely installed, and understand how the law works etcetera. Kids will be injured and killed, and that would be disproportionately from families that do not have the means, unfortunately, and I say that with a heavy heart.

Ms Jones: If our funding did not increase or continue, you would be looking at a critical service that links families together. Last year alone we supported 625 new parents to find their local playgroup. At playgroup they can develop their peer support relationships and learn about what other services there are in the community.

Our Paint and Play program has had a 47 per cent increase in attendance for the 2023-24 financial year. That equates to about 2,000 children that come through that service each year. We have 2,600 children go through our community parent-led playgroups. That is a lot of children that would be missing out on a family service, a play-based service, between the end of their MACH group and when they start their formal schooling.

MS ORR: Mr Ventura, you currently receive funding from the ACT government. What does that go towards?

Mr Ventura: Yes; ACT Health. In our contract there is a list of line items basically to keep our doors open, to provide services to the community—8,000 outputs. That includes, for example, people going out to speak to MACH clinics etcetera. It is a public document; I can send through, for the benefit of the committee, if you like, our contract.

MS ORR: With the funding that is there, is the argument for increased funding that you cannot meet those requirements with the funding that is provided?

Mr Ventura: That is correct, yes.

MS ORR: There has been additional funding; I believe it went out to—

Mr Ventura: There were a few others.

MS ORR: There was a million dollars or something that went out to a range of groups, including yours. I note that it is for one year; that is because there is a commissioning process underway. You are part of the commissioning process?

Mr Ventura: We are aware of the commissioning process. I would note that other organisations have raised concerns about that particular process, particularly how it adds an administrative burden, with no guarantee of success for organisations that are running on nothing and are also running to capacity. For example, I have reduced my pay down to one day a week, just to be able to keep our doors open and be able to pay our staff. That is the situation.

MS ORR: Where are the cost pressures coming from?

Mr Ventura: Basically, from our outputs. Our biggest outlay is staff costs. That is not because our staff are earning a lot. Our Kidsafe officers, for example, recently were only earning \$25.29 an hour, which is a tick above the minimum wage. As a result of me taking the measures that I did with regard to my own pay, we have been able to bump them up to about \$31 an hour, so they are now basically on par. Before, they were below. Now at least they are on par with someone who stacks shelves at Aldi. I mention that in the context that our wages bill is obviously the biggest part of what we do, but it is not because our staff are earning extravagant wages or anything like that.

Our rent alone, for example, this year will increase by five per cent. That is less than the indexation rate. It costs us tens of thousands of dollars. I do have these figures; I can take on notice forwarding them through, if you like, because I am in the process of finalising our budget. It costs us tens of thousands of dollars quite literally to be able to open the doors, by the time we pay for things like insurance, workers compensation, long service, everything related to wages, internet and phone bills, electricity et cetera. All of that consumes a lot of that.

We try our best to complement that with essentially service provision to the community. If people come in and pay a fee, they get their car seat checked or installed—something like that. I have run the numbers. I have taken measures. Our whole committee has gone through it. Kidsafe is not viable with the current funding model, and we cannot just start charging the community more because that would obviously be counterproductive.

MS ORR: This has been quite a topical one. I note that you have been out in the media, so it has been quite prominent. In preparing for today, I asked myself, “What do other groups get?” Kidsafe is not just in the ACT; it is in New South Wales. I was surprised when I looked it up; it is on the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission website. It seems that, comparatively, the ACT had you on a much higher level of funding. The question that I put to you is: how is it that it is not enough here but the other groups are doing what they are doing?

Mr Ventura: I would note, for instance, that Tasmania does not run a shopfront. That cost imposition is significantly less. I would, however, note—obviously, this would have increased somewhat; this is from the ABS—that coupled families with children under 15, dependent students, in Gungahlin increased 83 per cent from 2011 to 2021. It would have increased a lot more since then. One-parent families with children under 15 have increased by 84 per cent.

I would note that we are expected to grow to 500,000 people by 2030. We have some parts of Canberra that are about 30 kilometres away from Pearce. We know for a fact that there are people that do not come to Kidsafe or are not able to access our safety

information services because there is not the ability to do that. I have heard before that “other states do this, and get this”, et cetera. I have a list of things here that we would like to do. We are not trying to ask for anything superfluous; we are trying to ask for things such as doing education programs in schools, running free pop-up sites in partnership with organisations like Roundabout, the Multicultural Hub Canberra, and to be able to reach new migrant, asylum seeker and refugee families, to make sure that their kids are safe in the car. All of that is tied to something, and it is really not that much, comparatively.

If we are going to make comparisons on things, I would also note that the increase in funding that we are asking for is a little bit more than the increase in funding, on top of the millions that they already get, in the horseracing industry. It is \$8 million—

MS ORR: Mr Ventura, you are losing me on that one. That is a bit silly and we do not have a lot of time, so we are not going down that path. Going back to my question, you have not really answered it, in my opinion. Queensland, Tasmania and the Northern Territory all get less. They are more dispersed; they are bigger states. Again, I am not understanding, because it has not been explained to me, why it is so impossible for the ACT to operate what you are saying needs to be done when other states are doing it.

Mr Ventura: The onus would be on the ACT government to communicate and justify to local families why, for example, kids are not deserving of an education program in schools, why we should not fund pop-up sites and things like that.

MS ORR: Mr Ventura, you receive funding to do all of these things; they are there.

Mr Ventura: Yes.

MS ORR: I am still not getting any good, detailed information. I am getting a lot of emotive statements, but that is not actually helping.

Mr Ventura: Yes, it is emotive, because we are talking about kids.

MS ORR: You said Tasmania does not operate a shopfront, so that helps with their costs.

Mr Ventura: Yes. I cannot speak for other states and territories. I cannot speak for what they do.

MS ORR: You raised that as an example, Mr Ventura; I think you have already spoken to it. My question to you is: have you had a look at what opportunities there are to deliver your services in a way that might also cut down the cost and so that you can work within the funding that has been provided?

Mr Ventura: Absolutely. I have reached out basically to every Lions and Rotary club across the ACT and Queanbeyan. I have spoken to some of those. We have spoken to businesses. We have had to marginally increase our costs. I would note the fact that I have a little baby at home, and I have reduced my salary, my Kidsafe salary, by essentially two-thirds in order to be able to look after the staff.

With what we do, and Canberrans recognise this, we are basically running at capacity. We would have to cut down on what we do. The point I am trying to make is this: with more, we can do more; it is as simple as that. We can reach those harder to reach communities, we can do an education program in schools, and that sort of thing, which we think is very much worth the money. As for the amount of money that the ACT government provides, obviously, that is a matter for the ACT government. We will do what we can with that, but I am trying to make the argument that we would like more so that we can do more that will directly go towards keeping kids safe. It is simple. As for what other states and territories do, that is a matter for them. I am trying to focus on kids in Canberra.

MS ORR: I have questions for Playgroups, too. Mr Ventura, just picking up on that, you would like to do more.

Mr Ventura: Yes.

MS ORR: I appreciate—and you can hopefully appreciate this, too—that every group that comes before us is very passionate about what they do. They always say, “There’s always more to be done there.” I will pre-empt you saying that this is a matter of keeping kids safe, and that is why it is vitally important. Budgeting is all about priorities and, in a perfect world, we would have infinite funds to give infinite money to everyone. How would you prioritise, though, as to what is the most important thing? Are we meeting the requirements we need to meet to make sure we are targeting getting the safety where we need it, while knowing that there is always more that we can do?

Mr Ventura: I can promise you that we are happy with our existing logo, and I think Canberrans are already very comfortable with navigating our services in that regard. I think we also have a very good HR system, so that works well. We definitely do not have to spend money on that. Just to make sure that I have understood the question, would you mind asking it again?

MS ORR: The statement you put out was along the lines of, “It’s very simple; we’d like to be able to do more, and we need more money to do that.”

Mr Ventura: Yes.

MS ORR: By all accounts, there is already quite a lot going on with kids’ safety and with the programs that you are running. With making a decision to give more money, governments have to justify such decisions.

Mr Ventura: Of course, yes.

MS ORR: The question I am putting to you is: what is it that would mean that Kidsafe has to be prioritised over everything else?

Mr Ventura: I am not sure I am comfortable saying that Kidsafe is more deserving than, say, Playgroups, a women’s shelter or a drug and alcohol rehabilitation service. I am not sure that trying to play the community sector off against each other is the best way of doing that. Obviously, as you have mentioned, every organisation is deserving, and a budget is about priorities. The reason why I mentioned the horse track is because

there are items of expenditure within the budget that cost millions that could go to other purposes.

I am just making the case for Kidsafe. I would love to see, for example, women's health services funded properly. I would love to see, for example, the Mental Health Community Coalition of the ACT not be at crisis point. I would love to see Capital Region Community Services not have to close particular services because of a lack of funding. I would love to see disability service providers not have to cut services because of those sorts of things. I would love to see environmental protection groups be able to get the funding they need to care for our beautiful environment. There are a whole bunch of things that I would love to see, in a perfect world.

I can only make the case for Kidsafe, and I think there is absolutely scope to do more on that. As a case in point, in the first quarter of this year alone, the Motor Accident Injuries Commission paid out over \$6 million for people who were injured in car accidents to maintain quality of life, pay for health care et cetera. If we spent a tiny fraction of that—obviously, if an accident is going to happen, it is going to happen—at the very minimum on making sure that a kid in a car that finds themselves in a car accident is in a car seat that is safe, which gives them a 70 per cent better chance of surviving, as opposed to ending up in emergency with potentially life-changing and life-destroying injury, that is money well spent, because that will save money down the track.

I am not here to go into competition with any other organisation, because I cannot do that. I only work for Kidsafe. I am also a Canberran. That is a matter for the ACT—

MS ORR: I appreciate you are not here to go into competition. The very nature of the budgetary process, though, with there being finite funding, means that, for lack of a better way of putting it, you are somewhat in competition, because decisions have to be made about priorities. I appreciate that you are not trying to go into competition, but it is just a reality.

THE CHAIR: We will take that as a statement, because I think we need to move on.

MS CASTLEY: Mr Ventura, you mentioned car checks. I believe that the rent on your building is more; it is not the cheap community centre type of rent. Is that correct? You pay more than the average, when it comes to community centres.

Mr Ventura: The Pearce community centre is a not-for-profit. If it were in, for example, a private centre, we would be paying even more.

MS CASTLEY: How many car checks do you do? I am happy for you to take it on notice. How many car seat checks do you do?

Mr Ventura: We do thousands. I would have to take the exact number on notice, but it is thousands per year.

MS CASTLEY: Is that increasing every year?

Mr Ventura: Yes; increase in demand for services, basically as a direct result of more families and then more cars on the road.

MS CASTLEY: I know you provide a free service as well.

Mr Ventura: Yes.

MS CASTLEY: People do come along and pay you to check the car seat—all of that stuff. How many free services a year are you able to provide?

Mr Ventura: The exact number—

MS CASTLEY: And is it reducing? How does that work?

Mr Ventura: Yes. Basically, what we are now able to offer, and even that is a stretch, is that, with anyone who comes with a voucher—they have gone to Roundabout and picked up a free car seat, and they come to us—it is fitted and installed for free. If someone presents to us with a Health Care Card, with a letter of reference from a local community service provider, from a social worker saying that they are escaping domestic violence, for example, we will look after them for free.

We have had essentially to means test that, which is fine. I am not even necessarily saying that we want to provide everyone with a free car seat check who requests it, but we want to be able to do, at a minimum, that. It is moving towards a situation where we will need to completely restructure what we do and we will be able to do less, with the recurrent funding that we have.

MS ORR: I have a question for Playgroups. You have been sitting there so patiently. We do not have a submission from you. I have a number of really good playgroups in my community. For instance, in Yerrabi, the biggest issue we have for playgroups is usually finding suitable places. The groups are not necessarily saying, “We need lots more funding;” it is a matter of saying, “Is there a bit of help with getting spaces?” Can I get a bit of a steer from you, because I am big on prioritisation, as to what you think some of the priorities are that we should be looking at, preferably in order of their priority?

Ms Jones: Absolutely. The data shows that there is increasing developmental vulnerability amongst Canberra’s children, and providing access to venues for local playgroups, as you mentioned, is becoming a harder task. There is also the administration cost of that backbone support to go out and seek those venues, help with the establishment and support those community playgroups.

There is also the population growth. As I mentioned, our Paint and Play playgroups had a 47 per cent increase over a 12-month period. It is about the ability for ACT Playgroups to be responsive to local playgroups. We are seeing an increase in domestic violence disclosures and families seeking additional financial support. There is also the issue of families using playgroups as a stopgap because there is a wait for health and allied health services. Volunteers are needing support, regarding where we refer families to, and how they can set up a playgroup as an environment that is a soft entry point.

My overall point, Ms Orr, would be that funding a universal service which provides a soft entry point can prevent that escalation and provide some early intervention.

MS ORR: Are there any existing services or areas within the community sector that you could see a natural partnership with, that might provide a bit of an immediate response?

Ms Jones: We are quite well connected, I must say. We work in partnership with EACH. We work in partnership with the MACH services. We are supportive of and supported by the health child and family centres. We are connected in with education in terms of the Preschool Pathways program and various other services funded through the child and families bucket, so we are quite well connected and supported.

MISS NUTTALL: Feel free to take this on notice, Mr Ventura. I would be really curious to hear more about your education program in particular and what role you would envisage taking in schools. Again, I am mindful of the time; please feel free to take that on notice, if that is easier.

Mr Ventura: In a very brief nutshell, think of Constable Koala and Healthy Harold—basically, something along those lines. It is a personal vision of mine—this is a medium-term goal—that every kid participates in a Kidsafe safety session in their school by the time they reach the age of three. They would learn, for example, how to behave around a driveway, why not to swallow a button battery, what happens if they stick a knife in a toaster, and all of those kinds of things. Basically, it would be something along the lines of Constable Koala and Healthy Harold directed at kids in schools, so that they can make better safety choices.

THE CHAIR: We will close there. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank our witnesses from Kidsafe ACT and Playgroups ACT for your attendance today. You have taken a few questions on notice. Could you please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*? Thank you again for your appearance and for all of the hard work that you do.

BUTLER, MR LACHLAN, Chair, Belconnen Community Council

THE CHAIR: We would now like to welcome Mr Lachlan Butler, chair of the Belconnen Community Council. I would like to remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, the pink sheet on the table. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

Mr Butler: I understand and agree to comply.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Butler: I will keep it very short, noting the time. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the budget consultation process for 2024-25 and for the opportunity to answer questions relating to our submission. The Belconnen Community Council represents the residents, students and businesses of the Belconnen district, and our submission puts forward priorities identified through consultation with our community.

Remaining the ACT's largest district by population, Belconnen is also set for significant population growth, with an expected increase of 70,000 residents by 2060. This growth underscores the urgent need for strategic investments in infrastructure, services and amenities for Belconnen to maintain and enhance our economic and environmental health. The BCC continues to encourage the government to adopt bold measures that reflect the aspirations and challenges of the Belconnen people and businesses as it continues to grow and mature.

Projects like the William Hovell Drive Duplication have gone on for far too long. There have been delays with the Strathnairn Primary School, the Kippax shop upgrades and the FOGO trial being extended. These project delays also delay the projects and infrastructure that comes after that. We have attempted to be reasonable with our budget ask, focusing on funding for announced projects, to get them delivered, and smaller quick projects that benefit our community, as well as funding for the planning of longer-term more bold projects. There is lots more to talk about so I welcome your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. What is the council's view on the proposed Wallaroo Solar Farm development, just across from the border from Dunlop?

Mr Butler: I think that is definitely a little bit outside the scope, but we think that there has not been enough community consultation done with ACT residents. You can see that even with the meeting that they did last week. It was on a Thursday at 10 am in Murrumbateman. The Belconnen Community Council itself was listed as a special interest group that the developer should consult with. We were only officially contacted six days before the submissions closed for the development application. We are concerned that this project is potentially using a loophole on a border. We think that, if a development is going to happen there, it should follow the same rules that would apply if it were near Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle or any New South Wales regional city. The border does not mean that people do not exist beyond that.

MR CAIN: How do you counter the argument that it is just NIMBYism on a project that is going to inject some energy into the market?

Mr Butler: I definitely understand why people would see it as a bunch of NIMBYs complaining.

THE CHAIR: I do not think he is saying it is NIMBYs.

MR CAIN: No; that is the criticism.

Mr Butler: I definitely get frustrated when projects get held up by these sort of things, but I believe that genuine community consultation results in better projects, and that has been lacking here. I think once you explain some of the aspects of it—like the point I mentioned earlier about the rules that would apply if Canberra was a New South Wales city versus a Canberra city—I think people would be a bit more understanding.

MR CAIN: Do you think the BCC will be advised, as a direct stakeholder, on the next steps by the Planning Commission?

Mr Butler: We definitely hope so. The Planning Commission did reach out to us to help promote the meeting that was on last week, and we did have a brief conversation. I spoke as a private citizen at last week's meeting. For me, it is the fact that the developer was told that we were a special interest group that they should consult, and they didn't consult us.

MS ORR: Is there a particular element of or approach to the City Transitway feasibility study that you want to prioritise? This has been quite a big topic?

Mr Butler: What was the first part of that, sorry?

MS ORR: Is there a particular element or a particular approach to the City Transitway feasibility study that you would like to see prioritised?

Mr Butler: I think we definitely want to see that project proceed. Last estimates I came here and I was asked whether there was anything for public transport for the Belconnen district, and I had to say no. It is great that there is something this time round. The question that we put forward to the budget briefing that the community councils got was: why is this funding for the next two financial years when the Legislative Assembly agreed to deliver it by October 2028? We're a bit confused as to why there would be funding for a feasibility study over two financial years when it is meant to be delivered in four and a half years. We're just keen to see that get done as quickly as possible—with, obviously doing a good job—noting that the new northside hospital project will have an impact on how it is delivered.

MS ORR: I think you note in your submission that you would like to see the health services on the north side enhanced. Are you able to provide a little bit more insight into that?

Mr Butler: I think when it comes to hospital services, it is one of those things that you might not think about it until you have to go, but you want to make sure that the services you get are what you need and are of the quality that you expect. We have had a lot of people reach out to us saying that they've been transferred between the Canberra

Hospital and the North Canberra Hospital, they've had to go multiple times, they've been sent home because it is busy or they're there for hours. We did a survey that was shared on Facebook and put a bit of advertising behind it. We have been consulting the community for a number of months on this, and healthcare services is one of the key issues that is raised with us.

We have heard that the new northside hospital is expected to begin construction mid-decade. We are approaching mid-decade pretty quickly. Noting some of the delayed projects that we mentioned earlier, one thing that is a focus for us is making sure that the services at the North Canberra Hospital meet expectations and that you can provide that confidence to the public.

MS ORR: I am happy to note that down.

MISS NUTTALL: The 2016 Belconnen Town Centre Master Plan called for more facilities for Margaret Timpson Park. Why do you think these facilities have not been delivered?

Mr Butler: That is a great question. I think one thing that people think—and I have heard it before and I spoke about green spaces and a bunch of people commented on the ABC article that—is: “Don’t be a fool; there is the lake right next to it.” Some of the things that have been raised with us include whether there should be a playground at Margaret Timpson Park and whether there should be a public toilet at Margaret Timpson Park. With thousands of new residents moving into the town centre, we really need to maximise what amenities are available to residents. Margaret Timpson Park is a really good example. Currently, there is not a lot to do there, but there is a lot of opportunity.

MR CAIN: I have a question on the council’s position on the proposed direct sale of public land to the Woolworths Group at Hawker. For the record, what is the council’s view on this?

Mr Butler: We do not have a firm position on the direct sale itself, but we are very on the fact that the community consultation was not done right. Woolworths, or Communication Link on behalf of Woolworths, came out and said, “Do you want a better Woolworths?” People said yes. “We did not see any of the pictures that were put forward and we did not hear any of the ideas that were put forward. It was told to us as a listening exercise and they would come back with something, and they just went straight for the direct sale.

MR CAIN: On behalf of the council—and I am also happy for you as a resident to express a view, if you want to distinguish the two—what do you think should be the preferred process?

Mr Butler: We did a survey on the Hawker Village shop. We did a letterbox drop to over 4,000 households on this matter. There was a very clear consensus that the community wants something done with Hawker Village. There were more people in favour of large-scale redevelopment than just fiddling around the edges—for lack of a better term. We definitely want to see something happen there, but the community has to be involved; otherwise, you are just going to have people against it and not buy into

the vision that is put forward.

MR CAIN: There is a very strong submission, as you would be aware, from the Friends of Hawker Village. What is your response to their submission?

Mr Butler: When was the submission put forward?

MR CAIN: They have been gathering signatures to prevent the direct sale at Hawker Village itself.

Mr Butler: We encourage all community organisations to be involved. We think that, the more people that are involved and the more organisations that are involved in the community, the better outcome we are going to have. We do not share the same view that Friends of Hawker Village have. They definitely have a perspective and they are putting that forward—and good on them for doing that. We are focused more on the survey that we did, because we focusing on making sure that we are representative of the community that we represent.

MR CAIN: Are you communicating that survey result—or already have?

Mr Butler: It is on our website. We submitted it to the Woolworths consultation process, and it is publicly available on our website as well.

MR CAIN: Do you think there will be any supplementary action from the council on this issue, or are you just waiting to see the outcome?

Mr Butler: It is challenging, because the government at the moment has said that it is going through a particular process. We are keen and willing to have the conversation with the government about how we can expand on the community consultation. We are very disappointed that Woolworths just came out and said, “Do you want a better Woolworths?” Of course people are going to say yes. Then they went straight to the development application, which I think is a bit of a shame.

MR CAIN: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: In the budget submission you mention the Belconnen Renewal Authority. Can you run me through how that would be a useful addition?

Mr Butler: We put this forward based on a lot of feedback that we received that development in the town centre seemed quite haphazard. The Suburban Land Agency does some pretty good work. I think there is a variety of viewpoints on the quality of their work, but they go out and do some consultation before they start selling off a block of land. But we are not seeing that translate into improving the overall environment of the town centre. I will not make a statement on it, but some people would say that developers are not fulfilling the good design practices that are put forward by the SLA in their design briefs.

We think that some sort of authority or government agency could be created to have that big-picture view of the Belconnen Town Centre, so that it is not just this block being done or the Education Directorate doing something over here and TCCS doing

something here, but someone that can look at the town centre and go, “How can we make this a really, really good place for residents, people who work here, students of UC or people who just come and recreate?”

THE CHAIR: Is there a Belconnen Town Centre master plan?

Mr Butler: There is a Belconnen Town Centre master plan, but we are not really seeing what was put in there being delivered. I think a clear example is Emu Bank—Fast Food Alley, as some people refer to it. We are not really seeing action on what is in the master plan and there is not really one person responsible for delivering the master plan.

MS ORR: Just on that, Mr Butler, do you think the new planning system and linking it back to the district strategies and having the intentions of the master plan reflected in that will start to help to improve the planning outcomes we are seeing in Belconnen?

Mr Butler: I think the concept of district plans could. I think the district strategy that has been put forward and passed by the Assembly has a lot of “The government should look into this or assess this,” but there are not really any concrete actionable steps in there. I think the idea of a district strategy is good, but I think it needs a bit more work.

MS ORR: So you are saying it has potential but we will see how it goes?

Mr Butler: Yes.

MS ORR: With the CRA, I believe that there is a levy on businesses which helps enable a lot of the work they do. In putting forward your suggestion for Belconnen, would you consider a levy on Belconnen businesses as a way to achieving that or did you have something else in mind?

Mr Butler: We think that there is probably room for the government to fund it. We know that there are pros and cons to the City Renewal Authority and that, arguably, it could be improved. We went with the “Belconnen Renewal Authority”, for a lack of a better name, just to make it a bit more catchy—

MS ORR: So you are not asking for a like for like—

Mr Butler: No; not identical. I think there is definitely a lot of work to see what are the good parts of the City Renewal Authority and how we can implement that. I do not see it being an aspect of developing a block of land and selling it off—having that development aspect. I think it should be very city services focused and public space focused.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you very much for your appearance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you again for coming along, and thanks for your advocacy for the Belconnen area generally.

CRIMMINS, MS FRANCES, Chief Executive Officer, YWCA Canberra
DWYER, MS LEAH, Director of Policy and Advocacy, YWCA Canberra

THE CHAIR: We welcome Frances Crimmins and Leah Dwyer from the YWCA. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is on the pink sheet on your table. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it. We will start with Ms Crimmins.

Ms Crimmins: Yes; I understand the statement and I agree to comply.

Ms Dwyer: Yes; I have read it and I agree to comply.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms Crimmins: Yes. I have a very short statement. Thank you for the opportunity to attend this afternoon. I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. YWCA Canberra is a trusted partner of the Canberra community. It supports women and girls at every stage of their life journey and is a long-time contributor to budget consultation and reviews. We welcome the pre-budget announcement of Minister Berry to invest \$12 million from the safer families levy over four years into frontline domestic and sexual violence services. Under the measure, our Domestic Violence Support Service will receive just under a million dollars from this announcement. This will allow us to employ two new specialist domestic violence workers. Our service sees 22 new clients a month, on average. In the past, we have had to put on hold referrals because we simply did not have the staff to meet the demand. This investment is welcome, but it was very much overdue.

As a registered community housing provider and provider of homelessness support and tenancy services, we have also used the budget process to highlight the ongoing shortages in housing supply, particularly in income based rent housing. We are at a crossroads regarding the supply of new social housing builds in this city and it derives almost entirely from the relationship between land sales and the budget's bottom line. We have consistently called for a more affordable land release scheme that permits community housing providers to access land parcels at discounted rates, with the goal of building more social and affordable housing—and I stress “social”—because we are not seeing enough investment for it to be a financially viable project.

In 2023, our survey of over 1,000 women in Canberra revealed the alarming choices and stress many women face in Canberra. Thirty-two per cent of respondents lacked sufficient savings to cover one housing payment if they lost their income, 30 per cent said they were in a state of financial stress or crisis, and 35 per cent believe they will struggle in retirement. All these figures also reflect the findings of our 2021 survey.

YWCA Canberra's 2024-25 budget submission also draws attention to increasing demand on our food relief service in Tuggeranong and the overwhelming demand on our domestic violence support service. The announcement of \$913,000 towards emergency material, financial aid and food relief support is welcome but does not

continue beyond this financial year. We continue to see the enormity of the cost-of-living pressures at our Lanyon food pantry, which earlier this month recorded 76 people in one day accessing food relief. I welcome questions from the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will start. Could you tell us about your experience with the safer families levy—how it has been allocated over the years between government agencies and frontline services. Has that changed recently? And how might this diverge from public expectation?

Ms Crimmins: Our understanding and our experience since the safer families levy was introduced eight years ago is that this is the first time that significant funding—as I said, over four years—has been put to frontline services. I note that the budget statement mentioned that the safer families levy was originally there, in 2016, to provide community support and raise awareness of domestic and family violence in the ACT community. However, this is significantly different to previous statements that it was about frontline support, whether that is about supporting policing or crisis services. That is the first time there has been a significant departure from when it was first introduced.

We say it is long overdue. In eight years, we have not seen any significant investment in frontline services. From our perspective, I do not think the average Canberran understands that when they see it on their rates notice. I have many members of the public reaching out to me. In fact, I got a call today from another community member who has asked, in terms of today, whether we will get any new information on the safer families levy and how it was allocated in the prior eight years.

THE CHAIR: To paraphrase, are you suggesting that, when it was introduced, the average Canberran may have presumed it was going to frontline services such as your own, which was not the case for many years?

Ms Crimmins: That is correct, until this budget announcement.

MS CASTLEY: I have a supplementary question. Do you have the figures on how much money has accrued over eight years? I can find it, but I just wonder if you know.

Ms Dwyer: It would be available.

MS CASTLEY: I can find it.

Ms Dwyer: I note that in the original tranche it was about \$24 million over four years, and now, with the increase, it sits around \$30 million or so, and then it will be \$50 million. It would definitely be available. I am happy to provide it to you, though.

THE CHAIR: You will take that on notice?

Ms Dwyer: Yes; I can do that. I will get my calculator out.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. I had a thought in my head and now it is gone, so I shall move on. I am sure it will come back to me. Ms Orr, do you have a substantive question?

MS ORR: Yes. I would like to pick up on something else. Ms Dwyer might take this

one, based on previous comments she has given. There are the wellbeing indicators. You note that there are improving wellbeing domains and indicators. Can you run me through some of your views and the opportunities you see?

Ms Dwyer: We have had follow-up discussions with the ACT government about this as well, noting that it is being reviewed. This was more a conceptual look at the Wellbeing Framework and how it could be improved. Our original impression of the framework was that it was not a sophisticated analysis of the data that is available to look at any particular tranche. For example, there is the safety indicator. From memory, the only marker or indicator in that tranche is perceptions of safety. We know that police data provides perceptions of safety as part of the RoGS reporting, but it is not gender disaggregated. It also only takes into account one element of safety. For example, there is no data in the wellbeing dashboard about calls to police for domestic violence, calls to services like ours or how many people might be on a waitlist. There are so many different ways that you can look at safety. Our feedback was that we would be willing to participate in any conversation to improve the data that is available in the first instance, and the data that is used as well.

MS ORR: Did you mention that this discussion has progressed a little bit?

Ms Dwyer: Yes; it did.

MS ORR: Where is it up to?

Ms Dwyer: I could not tell you at the moment. I think it is in hands of the ACT government.

MS ORR: You provided the feedback and they have taken it on board?

Ms Dwyer: Yes.

MS ORR: Thanks.

MISS NUTTALL: So many of our critical social problems are related to housing. Women and those in abusive relationships cannot leave if they do not have access to affordable public and social housing. People cannot get their lives back on track if they do not have a home. Do you think the government has built and bought enough public homes?

Ms Crimmins: The commitment in the Growing and Renewing program from 2020, as we understand it, was that the end of life of a lot of public housing is being developed, but, on the growth side, there are only an additional 400 public housing dwellings from 2020 to 2027. It is our position that that is probably not sufficient to meet the demand, knowing that there are over 3,000 people on the waitlist. I would not think that an additional 400 public housing options by 2027, over a seven-year period, is ambitious enough when we see the data and know the number of people on the priority waiting list, particularly families.

Ms Dwyer: Following on from that, it might worth reflecting on what Fran said in the opening statement about stressing social housing and making that delineation between

social housing and community housing. I just looked at the Indicative Land Release program before I came today, and it is worth noting that this kind of conflation between social housing, affordable housing and community housing permeates all through government speak. It is really important that there is actually a distinction. If I look at the Indicative Land Release program, for example, there is a discussion about 608 dedicated community, public or affordable homes without any set social housing target. We know—and also from the discussions that we have had with so many people here—that the target will end up in the community housing bucket and not in the income based rent bucket, which is where social housing is.

THE CHAIR: Ms Castley, do you have a question?

MS CASTLEY: Yes; thank you. In May, the Assembly agreed to my calls for an education campaign with regard to coercive control. Funding has been announced. Based on your experience in addressing coercive control and abuse, is the amount budgeted enough? And what sort of education campaign would you like to see?

Ms Crimmins: We would say that an education campaign needs to sit alongside legislation to legislate that coercive control is illegal. In terms of the amount allocated for education, that might be fine for a small education campaign. However, I am not quite sure what we are educating about if we do not have legislation attached to coercive control. I understand that people want to wait and see what happens in other jurisdictions. We certainly look internationally and see what has occurred in other countries that are similar, like Scotland. In New South Wales, we are seeing the first arrests with this law being used. That was a two-year rollout. The education campaign going along with that is what we could replicate here in the ACT.

MS CASTLEY: Do you believe the government has adequately budgeted to have a similar campaign to New South Wales?

Ms Crimmins: In parallel with it and what we are seeing out of the federal government, but what we say needs to occur at the same time is legislation, so we need to see budgeted money to start that process.

Ms Dwyer: Following up on that, maybe it would be worth considering the window of time the government is looking at. If the funding is available this year, when will we actually be in a position to see any kind of material for this? We know that the consent education campaign, for example, which came into place after the positive consent reforms, has not got off the ground yet. That legislation is maybe two years old now. There was always an education component to it and it has not started yet.

Ms Crimmins: We have the legislation, but we are still waiting on the education.

MS CASTLEY: I understand. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Very briefly, I noticed that the Women's Budget Statement included three-year-old child care, which is a lovely thing. It is fantastic, but to me it implies that the government sees three-year-old child care or early education and care as women's problems or women's business. Has anyone expressed that to you?

Ms Crimmins: Yes. I would see the three-year-old preschool initiative sit in the education budget and that educating children is not the responsibility of women; it is the dual function of parents. I know that single-parent households will greatly appreciate that. However, it should be separated out and be in the education budget and investment, not as an investment solely for women. Children are the primary beneficiaries.

THE CHAIR: Perhaps like me, you found it a peculiar inclusion.

Ms Crimmins: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We must call it quits there. We really appreciate you showing up. If you have taken any questions taken on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you again for appearing and thanks for all your advocacy on behalf of women in the ACT.

Ms Crimmins: Thank you.

Ms Dwyer: Thank you.

Short suspension.

ZAKOUT, MR ZIAD, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Master Builders Australia
BURT, MS KRISTIE, Legal Counsel, Master Builders Australia

THE CHAIR: We now welcome Mr Ziad Zakout, CEO at Master Builders ACT, and Ms Kristie Burt, Legal Counsel at Master Builders ACT. Thank you for coming. I would like to remind you of protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, the pink sheet on the table in front of you. Could you please confirm that you understand the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

Mr Zakout: Yes, I do.

Ms Burt: Yes, I have read it and I understand it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Zakout: Yes. Master Builders is the peak industry association for the construction industry in the ACT. We have approximately 1,000 members in the construction industry. The majority of those are small family-owned businesses. The ACT building and construction industry workforce in the ACT is approximately 5.4 per cent of all the jobs in the ACT.

We put forward some of our budget proposals in November last year to be considered. The one issue we found with the budget that gave our members angst was the new capital works budget for 2024-25, which was \$36 million, whereas in the previous year we had that at \$302 million. Over five years we have been budgeted \$57 million for new capital works compared to \$1 billion over five years in last year's budget. This puts significant pressure on our members, many of whom who do not have contracts secured with the government and have no pipeline to look forward to, I guess. There is nothing there for the smaller- to medium-size contractors to deliver these projects because there are just no projects available for them.

THE CHAIR: Thanks. We have seen some recent closures, bankruptcy et cetera in the construction industry in the ACT and we have also more recently seen quite a lot of commentary about the role of the CFMEU Australia-wide, not necessarily specifically ACT. There was an MBA media release of 16 July headed, "No role for third parties in procurement decision-making, said Master Builders ACT", and in that media release MBA ACT claimed, and I quote:

Experiences in other jurisdictions, including Victoria and Queensland, show that the cost of construction can increase by up to 30 per cent due to delays brought about by CFMEU influence on building sites.

Can you elaborate on how union interference on building sites can have such a significant impact on the cost of construction and whether, from what you are aware of, construction costs in the ACT are being similarly impacted?

Ms Burt: In relation to the first point, in terms of the increase in costs et cetera, it comes down to potential time delays, particularly where there are interruptions to the work and the delays that are associated with that. In terms of enterprise agreements and those

sorts of things, the labour rates associated with particular enterprise agreements can sometimes be significantly higher, leading to increased rates for labour, which then consequently increases the contact prices that are available.

THE CHAIR: Just to be clear: you are not talking about not paying people what they are entitled to; you are talking about having to be above and beyond award rates?

Ms Burt: Yes.

THE CHAIR: The media release went on to say:

Master Builders ACT has been raising concerns about union interference in procurement for years. The MoU between Unions ACT and the ACT government was inappropriate, and the Secure Local Jobs Code is worse—

Do you think the ACT government have taken strong enough steps to take strong action? Do they perhaps need to sever ties with the CFMEU? Would that make a better construction industry in the ACT?

Ms Burt: There is a process required for procurement. We understand that and the members understand that there are particular roles that the procurement process needs to take to ensure that there is minimal reputational risk to the government but to also ensure that the preferred tenderer and the person that can perform the work and adhere to the laws is undertaking the work.

In terms of strengthening procurement in the ACT, the Government Procurement (Secure Local Jobs) Code, in my opinion, has improved practices. The members that we deal with that are Secure Local Jobs Code certified entities have also reflected on the process and report as such. In terms of the procurement processes themselves and the tendering processes, I think that's a slightly different conversation.

MS ORR: Mr Zakout, I want to pick up on some comments you made in the submission. I have here your submission from the community day, where you were sort of saying that the one thing that was not there was the forward works programs, particularly, for those small and medium projects. This has been a long-going discussion in the MBA and there were calls, I think a few years ago now, for it to have like a pipeline and to have an infrastructure plan so that there was certainty provided to business. One of the things I've noticed is that that has meant that a lot of stuff has been put forward and provisioned in other budgets. So, even though there is not new money necessarily coming through, there is still quite a strong pipeline of work there. It might have been provisioned previously though not done. So I wanted to get a bit of a view from you. When you bring in the criticism of the dollar amount per year, what recognition in that criticism has been given to the provisions that are already there, particularly for the forward years?

Mr Zakout: That was just looking at the budget that the ACT government has put out and those new works. That was just looking at that line there for the new works contract.

MS ORR: Oh, okay.

Mr Zakout: Last year it showed that, over five years, it was over \$1 billion, whereas this year showing over five years it is \$57 million. I am not sure if that has been provisioned somewhere else.

MS ORR: Yes. Where I was going was that that \$1 billion may not necessarily be for just one year's work; it would be provisioned over a number of years in the forward estimates. This is the bit where I am trying to get a better understanding of the difference of the numbers and the concern. The bit in my mind is like, "Well, hang on; you are saying that there is not work," but there is actually quite a lot because there is still a lot of money allocated in addition to the new work. There are the asset renewal programs as well, which would come through in different funding lines, not just necessarily the new capital provisions.

My summing up of what you have said—and tell me if I get it wrong and tell me if I have not quite used the right terms—is that there were big numbers before and it was not quite as big this year, and you are asking about what is going on. Is that kind of what you were saying?

Mr Zakout: Yes; correct. A lot of the work in progress has been secured by contractors already, and a lot of other contractors want to see opportunities, I guess, to do work for the ACT government. But if it has already been assigned to a contractor there is not really much to look forward to.

MS ORR: It would have been provisioned in the forward years of the budget estimates. So it would have been accounted for. It does not mean that work has commenced or it has been put out to tender and the procurements have occurred. I think this question is one for the Treasurer; so I might take it to him. You have put forward that you are a bit concerned about the lower number of new capital works and that there might not be the work over the next coming years, particularly for small to medium businesses. My concern is: Isn't it already there; it is just that it was previously provisioned? I guess we will hear what the Treasurer has to say. So I wanted to get an understanding of how you were arriving at that position. But, if I understand correctly, it was based purely on that \$39 million.

Mr Zakout: Yes.

Ms Burt: Ms Orr, can I make one a further supplementary comment for you to also perhaps take to the Treasurer?

MS ORR: Yes; please do.

Ms Burt: Some of the feedback that we received from our members in preparation for today included that there were also a number of requests for tender that all came out at once, and that also caused some concern.

MS ORR: Okay; so potentially pacing it?

Ms Burt: Correct.

MS ORR: I know during COVID there was a big backlog. Construction was definitely

one that has had a long tail. Did you see that rush of tenders come out is a sort of long tail with people trying to catch up on stuff that had not been done? Has it started to even out a bit or are you still seeing it—

Mr Zakout: Our members were telling us that in the June that past there were a lot of requests for tender coming out and they were not able to keep up with all the tendering. Part of that is that there have been changes to the ACT government procurement process where—

MS ORR: Is this also off the back of the changes to the planning system, or not so much?

Ms Burt: I think that might be a contributing factor as well.

Mr Zakout: Yes. Our members have told us that the ACT government is requesting long-term contracts now, which is making it harder for them and taking longer to put their—

MS ORR: Sorry, they are doing—

Mr Zakout: Requesting lump sum contracts, where it is taking longer to prepare the tender and to price it up correctly. Previously, they were using a schedule of rates, which they prefer to use. This is making it harder for the contractors to price and there is more risk to the contractors due to this. So they are charging a higher price for ACT to procure this.

MISS NUTTALL: I have heard that the private sector manages to build around 4,500 dwellings per annum in the ACT, which is about 2.5 per cent of the ACT housing stock. Do you think this is enough supply for housing?

Mr Zakout: Sorry; can you repeat the question?

MISS NUTTALL: Yes. The private sector manages to build 4,500 dwellings per annum in the ACT. I understand that is about 2.5 per cent of the ACT housing stock per annum. Do you think this is enough supply of housing?

Ms Burt: I think there can always be more supply. From the submissions before us, I think there needs to be additional housing available.

MISS NUTTALL: On average, how long does it take for the private sector to build a home?

Mr Zakout: A single residential home or a—

MISS NUTTALL: Yes.

Mr Zakout: I would say about 10 to 15 months.

Ms Burt: I think it depends on the inclusions and the type of dwelling that you are building.

THE CHAIR: And the weather.

Mr Zakout: And the weather, yes.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you; that is helpful.

MR CAIN: We have had over six months since the new Territory Plan was introduced. Do you have any general comments from your members as to how easy it is to work with the new plan or otherwise?

Mr Zakout: What we were getting from our members is that there are a lot of delays in the approval process at the moment.

MS ORR: In fairness, Mr Zakout, your predecessor, Mr Hopkins, used to say that to me every time he appeared before the committee.

MR CAIN: On the delays, are there particular parts of the process that seem to be more difficult to progress speedily?

Mr Zakout: Not that I am aware of.

Ms Burt: We can always take the question on notice and come back to you with further data.

MR CAIN: Yes; I would be interested in the feedback on the different processes involved and which parts are particularly problematic, timing wise.

THE CHAIR: I would like to thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within three business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you again for coming along, especially at relatively short notice.

Mr Zakout: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: All the very best.

The committee adjourned at 5.00 pm.