



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2021-2022](#))

Members:

**MR J DAVIS (Chair)
MR J MILLIGAN (Deputy Chair)
MR M PETTERSSON**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 10 NOVEMBER 2022

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr A Chynoweth (Ph: 620 75498)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

APPEARANCES

Community Services Directorate.....130, 143

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 12.19 pm.

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

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Wood, Ms Jo, Deputy Director-General

Gilding, Ms Louise, Executive Group Manager, Housing ACT

Aigner, Mr Geoff, Executive Branch Manager Client Services, Housing ACT

Roland, Ms Skye, Program Director, Growing and Renewing, Housing ACT

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing's continued inquiry into annual and financial reports 2021-22. The proceedings in this session will examine the annual reports of the Community Services Directorate.

Before we begin, on behalf of the committee I would like to acknowledge that we meet on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution that they make to life in this city and this region.

On the first occasion that you speak today please acknowledge that you have read and understood the privilege statement. Should you take any questions on notice today, please do clearly use the words, "I will take that question on notice". That assists our committee secretary in following up with you after the hearing to collate those answers. Today's hearings are being recorded and transcribed for Hansard and will be published. These proceedings are also being broadcast and web screamed live.

In our first session today we will be hearing from the Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Yvette Berry. Welcome, Minister Berry and your officials.

In the first instance, Minister, could I get you to introduce yourself and acknowledge the privilege statement?

Ms Berry: Yvette Berry, minister for housing, and I acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: I have got a couple of rapid-fire questions that I trust will be easily Googleable, but just to assist committee members. How many properties as of today does Housing ACT own and manage?

Ms Gilding: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

In terms of the exact number today, if you give me just one moment. I certainly have the 30 June number, and I am just going to have a look and see if one of my team actually has the today number.

MR PARTON: Do you want me to answer, Chair?

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Parton, no. I am happy for the question to be answered by members on that side of the room, but I appreciate your help.

Ms Gilding: I have a lot of data. Perhaps you could give me your second rapid-fire question.

THE CHAIR: Yes. How many properties has Housing ACT sold in the last financial year?

Ms Gilding: Yes, I do have that number as well. I am going to look to Ms Roland to actually answer that, and you probably have got both of them.

Ms Berry: Perhaps I can start and talk more broadly about over the last three years of the program where we have had 457 households who have agreed to relocate, with 349 household relocating.

THE CHAIR: Minister, I am not sure we are on to relocations. I guess I just want some of those raw numbers of the properties that we own.

Ms Berry: This includes how many properties we had sold?

THE CHAIR: Sold in the last financial year.

Ms Berry: We have acquired 93 dwellings from across the market over the last three years. We might have to take it on notice.

THE CHAIR: That is okay. Did somebody say they had the total number of properties?

Ms Wood: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. At the end of quarter 1 2022-23 there was a total portfolio of 11,541 properties.

THE CHAIR: So that is the top question: 11,541 properties as at the end of quarter 1. So on the last financial year, can I get the amount of properties that we sold?

Ms Berry: We will just take that on notice.

Ms Wood: Sorry, I am still just trying to find it.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Minister, I would have thought these were top-line questions, but anyway, in terms of the numbers—

Ms Berry: Well, you asked specifically for today's date, and so we are looking for as specific as we can, and we have some general figures, which is what I have been sharing, and those figures are appropriate, but if you are looking for specific numbers from today, we might have to take that on notice or get as close to as we possibly can, because, of course, those numbers change and vary as the program is being delivered.

THE CHAIR: The last question was not as of today: the amount that we sold in the last financial year.

Ms Berry: Well, we acquired 93 dwellings from the market over the last three years of the program. We completed the construction of 219 dwellings. We purchased from the SLA through the—

THE CHAIR: Sorry, how many did you say that you constructed? You are giving me for the last three years. I was just looking for the last year.

Ms Gilding: So 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022, in terms of the growth and renewal program, there were gross sales of \$139.1 million of 153 public housing dwellings; 34 dwellings were demolished for redevelopment; 12 land sites were purchased for redevelopment; 22 dwellings were purchased; 93 dwellings completed construction; and 160 households relocated under the program. So that is 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022. So that is the annual report period that we are talking about.

THE CHAIR: You would not happen to have the figure of the amount of properties that we owned for the last financial year?

Ms Gilding: At the end of 30 June, 11,521—

Ms Berry: I think Mr Davis is asking about the preceding financial year.

THE CHAIR: What I am getting at here is the year 2021-22. I would like the number that we owned in 2021 and in 2022 the number that we owned, so as I can ascertain if we are acquiring and developing at an equal-to-or-greater rate than we are selling. That is what I am trying to figure out.

Ms Gilding: Yes. So, look, I do have that.

Ms Berry: Before you go to that, if I am correct, Mr Davis, you are trying to get to whether or not we are going to grow our public housing.

THE CHAIR: And if it has in the last 12 months.

Ms Berry: Well, no, because the program is not linear. We have explained this on a number of occasions in committees and also through questions from Mr Parton as well, and we can go through that. There will be changes in the numbers of public housing along the way because we are doing a whole range of things that have to match up together to get new houses built and to get people into homes. We have to move people from homes, we have to demolish those homes, we have to sell those homes and we have to build new homes, so that all does not happen in a nice straight line. It is kind of a bit bumpy, but we will start seeing that increase from when?

Ms Gilding: We will see it starting to realise that growth from the 2024-25 year. So certainly I am very happy to go through the forecast numbers that we have.

THE CHAIR: What I would like to better understand is the rationale for selling properties at the rate that we are selling them when there are so many challenges for us

to build properties—challenges that, perhaps, were unexpected at the time this program commenced. It appears to me on these numbers we are letting them go quicker than we can get them built and 2024-25 seems, to me, quite far away to start reaching some of the PAGA commitments.

Ms Gilding: Certainly I think that is a very good observation in terms of the market factors that we are experiencing not only nationally but globally. So when we look at material supply, labour supply and, of course, wet weather, we have seen our construction build time increase significantly, and only in the last eight months we have seen that increase again. So at the beginning of the program when we were profiling and anticipating, of course, we had to forecast these things with as much data as we had at any given time. So when we bring all of those factors in, at the beginning of the program—and this applies to anybody who has been doing residential construction—it would take us about nine to 12 months to build. At the moment, because of all of those factors that I have mentioned, it is taking probably about 18 months.

One of the things that we did at the beginning of the program was set a baseline in terms of the stock number that we would not fall below, and that number is 11,465. We are ensuring that we do not drop under that number. How we do that is actually by looking at that sales program and ensuring that we slow it down according to what we have forecast in terms of the construction program.

So we are doing two things. We need to generate the revenue to pay for the new houses. Some of that revenue comes from appropriation through government, and a large part of that comes through sales. We do have certain amount of control in terms of the timing of those sales, but then there are other variables in terms of tenant relocation. So what we have actually seen in the beginning of the program, which has sort of actually helped us in terms of that slow start for tenant relocation, is that the seams actually have lagged behind in terms of that construction timeframe and those milestones. But when we bring in together those global factors, the weather, and then we look and we forecast out in terms of what is in the pipeline—and there are over 700 dwellings in various stages of that pipeline—we can better forecast when we will need what cash flow to pay for the construction, to pay subcontractors, to pay for material, to pay for the labour as part of that. So we are keeping a very close eye in terms of when we need that sales revenue. We have always said it is not a linear program, it is a flexible program, and we will tailor as much as we can taking into all of those various variables that we see in the marketplace at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Can I just get a steer on what, if any, conversations have happened within the directorate on revisiting on some of these numbers given that they were determined before house prices started to drop, so what we are selling we are not getting as great a return for ratepayers, and that construction timelines have blown out? Have these figures been re-adjusted to take into account either of those two factors?

Ms Gilding: We have been constantly re-adjusting and constantly talking internally, but also as part of our governance structures as well, particularly through the growth and renewal steering committee, who meet on a quarterly basis. So we would be talking about that profiling from the point of view that the rate of tenants moving, for example, impacts the rate of sales. Also then is the other part in terms of the pace of construction. We are constantly having that conversation and balancing both sides of the equation, if

I can call it that; it is about people, so equation is not quite the right word. We are balancing all of those client-centred factors in order to bring the program together. So it is a constant conversation is what I would have to say.

THE CHAIR: I appreciate it has been a constant conversation. Have the figures adjusted at all to consider those factors?

Ms Berry: No. We have got a target of a thousand homes in our public housing growth renewal program and 400 new, and that is in the program. That is what we have agreed to with the Greens.

DR PATERSON: This is a 10-year program of renewal; is that correct?

Ms Berry: Overall?

DR PATERSON: Overall.

Ms Berry: From the start of the last public housing growth renewal and then this one.

Ms Gilding: 2015, yes.

DR PATERSON: Okay. Cool. Thank you.

MR PARTON: Given that we are focusing on the fact that it is a 10-year program, and irrespective of the specific numbers down to the actual number of dwellings, Minister, would you agree that in the last 10 years the ACT population has gone up 25 per cent, but based on the figures that have been revealed again today, the volume of public housing in that time has fallen by three per cent?

Ms Berry: I would agree that the population has gone up. I would also say that there are also more community housing providers and provision of housing across the ACT as well as public housing. I would also note that the ACT has the second-highest public housing per capita in the country, second only to the Northern Territory, and that our investment in public housing is also the highest, second only to the Northern Territory, in the country. I would say that we are definitely doing everything we can to meet the needs of people who are in need of public housing.

We note that the rest of the country is having the same kinds of challenges as we are, and that there is a federal government now that has made a commitment to invest in public and community and social housing and more of it. So we will see increased numbers of public housing, community housing and affordable housing as a result of those commitments from the federal government, including our own commitments to increase—

MR PARTON: Minister, has the number of public housing dwellings risen or fallen in the last 10 years?

Ms Berry: Well we still remain the highest of public housing in the country—

MR PARTON: But that is not the question, Minister.

Ms Berry: However, it is definitely 1,000 more than it would have been 10 years ago under the Canberra Liberals.

MR PARTON: Minister, we are not talking about Canberra Liberals' policy; we are talking about what you have overseen as housing minister. Has the number of public housing dwellings risen or fallen in the last decade?

Ms Berry: It would have fallen by at least a thousand from the Canberra Liberals sell-off of public housing when they were in government, but it has not.

Ms Gilding: Minister, I do not have the exact number for 10 years ago burnt into my memory. What we do know is that the portfolio has been relatively stable or static. What we are seeing now though is an ability to actually grow the public housing portfolio by the 400 by—

MR PARTON: Minister, have any of the asset sales gone to bankroll the light rail project?

Ms Berry: Mr Parton, we have been through this and I refer you to my previous answers and the Chief Minister's previous answers on this. I would say that we have more public housing in the ACT than we did from before Labor came into power in the ACT government and the number of public housing that we have across the ACT has been relatively stable is my understanding.

MR PARTON: Thank you. Yesterday a media release stated the new ceiling insulation minimum energy standards for private rentals, starting April 2023, and I note that there was also a section in the release and in discussion from both ministers on a roll out for public housing. Can I ask how many public housing properties currently have ceiling insulation rated less than R2?

Ms Gilding: Thank you for the question. So, yes, you are right, there was the announcement about the requirements for insulation. Housing ACT will need to comply with those requirements. What we are doing as a first step is actually gathering the data so that we actually know. Historically when we have done our property condition assessments, we actually have not collected specific data about insulation and how much of it is in each public housing property. So as a first step we are doing property condition assessments across all of our properties and portfolio to actually gather that information so that we can accurately say this is how many houses will need an upgrade in their insulation and therefore figure out our run rate and make sure that we are compliant by the timeframe in 2026.

MR PARTON: Given that Housing ACT is in theory a model landlord, and given that this government has been talking a big talk about ceiling insulation in private rentals for a long time, does it seem a little odd that Housing ACT does not have this data at this stage, that you have not investigated and you do not know how many of your properties in this portfolio of 11,500 fall under that threshold?

Ms Gilding: I think you need to have a look at the specific age of our portfolio. When we look at the 11,000-odd properties and acknowledge that at least 4,000 are over the

age of 40 years old, you can make an assumption in terms of about that insulation and what would be there, but we in terms of that provision of maintenance I guess it has more been around kitchen upgrades, painting, carpets as opposed to insulation upgrades.

Now, we have seen the energy efficiency appliance upgrades and specific programs in relation to energy efficiency, which would go to the heart of being a social model landlord. I think the other thing we also recognise is that whenever we build new properties, if you look at all of those new properties coming online from 2015, they would have met the particular standards and building and energy efficiency standards for those particular periods. But this is an opportunity for us to actually take a baseline property condition audit stocktake across the whole property stock at a snapshot at a point in time which will certainly help us with that modelling going forward.

MR PARTON: Is there any estimate from Housing ACT as to how much this policy will cost for the portfolio? Because even based on your assumptions there, just on the back of the envelope my numbers here suggest around 30 million. Is there any estimate whatsoever of what it is going to cost Housing ACT to comply?

Ms Berry: I was just going to say, I think to start with we will have had 20 per cent of our housing stock renewed by the end of the growth and renewal program, so that will definitely have put a dint in the number of homes that may not have appropriate insulation. Of course it will be a work in progress because we will need to have the suppliers and trades to actually do this work.

MR PARTON: Do you think there might be a problem there, Minister, with the supply of trades and materials?

Ms Berry: I think there is a problem all over the country with supply of construction and materials everywhere.

MR PARTON: No, I agree; I am hearing you.

Ms Berry: So I am not going to pretend that that does not exist, and that would still be the case within insulation—

MR PARTON: And you think it might impact this scheme?

DR PATERSON: Mr Parton is debating the minister. Can we move on to other questions?

THE CHAIR: I think there is a fair debate on both sides but I take your point, Dr Paterson. Mr Parton I think you have had a fair go. I have got one supplementary on this line of questioning before I defer to Dr Paterson for a substantive.

Minister, in appendix 1 of the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement, point iv is:

Implement a five-year, \$50 million program to improve building efficiency and sustainability for social and public housing, low income owner-occupiers, and the lowest performing rental properties; this includes upgrades to government

housing, and financial incentives to implement minimum energy efficiency standards in rental properties.

Is that where the money for retrofitting public housing properties with insulation to meet the reformed Residential Tenancies Act is going to come from?

Ms Rule: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. That line item in the PAGA is not the responsibility of CSD and there is no specific line item for this particular piece of work in our budget; however, I think Ms Gilding has already talked about the fact that it will come through the construction of new properties, maintenance funding and the refurbishment of existing properties. So there are a number of funding sources that will contribute towards this piece of work, but not a dedicated line item in our budget.

Ms Gilding: In terms of the \$50 million, it is absolutely not the responsibility of CSD, but we are working with EPSDD and our colleagues in CMTEDD, and I think they are best placed to talk about how that funding allocation will come through. But we are anticipating, once we have our baseline data, that certainly there will be some of that funding provisioned towards insulation upgrade, in addition to the line items that Ms Rule mentioned as well.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

DR PATERSON: Minister, the 2018 housing strategy talks about the numbers of children and young people under the age of 18 seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services. Given we have seen increases in domestic and family violence and we have gone through COVID, is there any update on the level of youth homelessness in the ACT? Also what are we doing to address that?

Ms Rule: Dr Paterson, this is a question for Minister Vassarotti this afternoon.

Ms Berry: But we have got a commitment to the youth foyer at Woden as part of the CIT construction, so, that is something we are looking forward to progressing.

DR PATERSON: All right, I will speak to Minister Vassarotti about that one. For tenants participating in the growth and renewal program, where are we at with relocating people? How is that all progressing?

Ms Berry: Mr Aigner.

Mr Aigner: I have read and understood the privilege statement. Thank you for the question, Dr Paterson. As of 4 November, we have 748 tenants in the program; we have relocated 416, so we feel like we are making good progress. We have a consistent number over the last year of tenants waiting for suitable properties, and we kind of need a good pool of that to do all of the Tetris-style matching that we need to do across our client base and taking into consideration different property requirements and regional preferences and supports.

We also, as you probably know, have a tenant relocations exemption panel that has been operating now for a number of months. It has heard 66 exemption requests and

approved 47, and we have another 14 or 15 that are waiting to go to that panel. So overall I would say we are making good progress this year. There are new tenants entering the program as we assess assets and see whether they are part of the program or not, and our staff are out there all the time engaging and supporting people to move.

DR PATERSON: Have you had feedback from the tenants that you have relocated? How are they fitting into their new locations?

Mr Aigner: Yes, we do. I do not have the numbers in front of me, Dr Paterson, but we have recently undertaken a customer satisfaction survey and what we have seen through that is that, overall, tenants who have participated in the program are rating their satisfaction, particularly with their property, much higher than tenants who have not.

DR PATERSON: Thank you.

MR PARTON: Let me go with mould in public housing. The Canberra Liberals have been receiving a lot of complaints regarding mould in public housing. I wanted to go to a specific case, and I know we are not going to talk about specific cases, but if I allude to it you know which one I am talking about—one that has gone unattended for months and the pleas of tenants seem to fall on deaf ears. Recently, Minister, you responded to a media request regarding a certain property with mould, stating that you were aware that works were being completed and that they would be provided housing. The response that you gave sounded like a wonderful thing that Housing is doing, but my concern on this and on the frequent response to my letters is that when tenants hear this they refute that they have received a response from Housing, they refute that anything has been done and they refute that any extra accommodation has been offered. Why is it that you are saying these things publicly when they are not actually occurring?

Ms Berry: Mr Parton, when you or when a tenant is in contact with my office about an issue with fair public housing as a public housing tenant, that is that is then raised with Housing ACT who then provide advice to me following contact with program or housing managers about the circumstances of the individuals and the families within our properties to understand what the issue is, and how it is being—

MR PARTON: Dealt with?

Ms Berry: dealt with, yes, thank you. A menopause moment! But yes, and so that is where I get my advice. Then when I come back to you or to the tenants, it is based on the advice that I receive and that I check on to ensure that it is correct and up to date that the issue that a tenant or tenants have raised is being appropriately managed. It might be for a tenant or others that they have wanted something to happen more quickly, and it has not happened as quickly as they would prefer. That could be for a range of reasons; weather is one of them, access to the property is another one, access to another property for tenants to be housed in while significant works might be carried out within their properties can sometimes be a complex issue to address because it could be a specific requirement for a family on the actual type of property that they need. So we then have to go and look for appropriate accommodation whether that is in a hotel or within a property that we might have—might have!—vacant and available for use, and that is very much a might!

In circumstances where I have not heard from the tenant before and Housing has not heard from the tenant before, and so it is a new issue that we need to log and then have assessed, just by a tenant contacting my office or by you contacting me about an issue, say some carpet lifting or something like that, I do not then say, “Go and fix the carpet.” It goes to Housing or Programmed and then Programmed do an assessment of what needs to happen. So, that is in a broad sense the way that issues are communicated with me and then how I communicate back with tenants. Anything to add to that, Ms Gilding?

Ms Gilding: Yes. Actually there is something I would like to add. It has been raining a lot and so we have more mould problems than usual. If I could suggest that 80 per cent vinegar and 20 per cent water is a very cheap solution and it works a whole lot better than bleach. Bleach just takes the colour out. But look, we do try to support tenants and there is the difference between when is it a property caused mould issue versus when it is a tenant responsibility living-skill ability issue. Particularly if we find that if we have tenants who need support with lots of artefacts and lots of things in their houses and there is not enough ventilation due to a lot of things and a lot of items, we can find that mould is a really tricky thing to get hold of and get on top of. Where it is a property issue we then need to identify that as well and, again, work with the tenant, as minister has said, to resolve it.

MR PARTON: Minister, does the state of the ACT budget hamstring your ability to respond to extra issues like this as they arise, caused by extreme weather events?

Ms Berry: Well I think we have had—well it is \$140 million over the last couple of years in our maintenance program for public housing, and that includes addressing issues like I guess hazardous materials, like mould. So, no, I do not, but I do think that we have all—I think the last three years has been extraordinary as far as the weather is concerned.

MR PARTON: Are you happy with outcomes?

Ms Berry: At this stage I would say that \$140 million is a significant investment by government in a maintenance program; however, we will continue to work with the government around different funding for different parts of the Housing ACT portfolio that need to be addressed, and one of them is maintenance. This maintenance funding has had a significant impact on addressing some of the issues that our tenants raise, not just mould but also making sure that they have homes that they are happy to live in—new kitchens, new paint, new carpet, new bathrooms in some cases. Some of them have significant upgrades as well, as 20 per cent of our public housing stock being renewed at the end of the program. So, it is quite a bit of work happening across our ACT public housing portfolio. We have the most significant investment in the country, second to the Northern Territory, in our public housing in the ACT.

MR PARTON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Minister, earlier you mentioned that 93 properties had been acquired over the last three years. A lot of figures were thrown at me very quickly, can I get that broken down just into the last 12 months? How many were acquired?

Ms Berry: We will take that on notice.

Ms Gilding: Sorry, I did give it in another—can I?

Ms Berry: If you have the detail, otherwise we will take it on notice.

Ms Gilding: Yes, I do. So if I can, the program to date figure in terms of acquired or purchased, we often use acquisition when we mean buying from the market, so that was 93, but this past 12 months is 22.

THE CHAIR: Given that we seem, based on earlier questioning, to agree that the cost of construction and the timeframe for construction has gone up and that house prices have gone down, I think in almost all markets over the last quarter at least, have there been any discussions had or decisions made to redirect some of the money in the construction pool to the acquisition pool to get more homes into the portfolio quicker? Because the cranes up in the city suggest the private market seems to be doing a pretty good job of putting up towers and we have only bought 22 in the last year. Can I get some insights into discussions that have happened about upping the acquisition number perhaps if construction is not happening timely enough?

Ms Berry: I do not think it is as simple as just going out and purchasing a bunch of properties. I get what you are trying to say, Mr Davis, but it is actually purchasing properties that meets the needs of our tenants. So that is a little bit more complex than just going out and rocking up to the sale of a home and purchasing a property. You have to actually make sure that it meets the specific needs of a tenant or tenants and that it actually works in with our portfolio and the growth and renewal program.

This is not new; we purchase properties all the time, and during the last growth and renewal program we purchased a number of properties. The market was in a different situation back then. The market has definitely shifted since then, and we recognise that, and the program is very much different to the last growth and renewal program as well, where we were buying generally individual properties. Housing ACT is constantly, as part of its business as usual, identifying properties and purchasing properties that suit the needs of individual tenants or the portfolio.

THE CHAIR: Yes, I understand that, but we bought 22 in the last year and the wait list is more than 3,000. Surely there are properties on the market right now available for sale on which we do not have to wait for construction to be done which would meet the needs of a vast amount of those 3,000?

Ms Gilding: Actually no, if I can take that.

Ms Berry: Are you going to do the cost?

Ms Gilding: Well, actually, it is the demand that is expressed through our wait list, and it is not necessarily expressed through what is currently for sale on the market. It is a great question about do we buy or do we redevelop, and what we have found is that the product that we need most of we actually need to construct. So it is better for us to actually construct a dwelling that is class C, that is adaptable and that actually meets a person with disability, somebody who wants to age in place. It is really hard to buy

class C properties, particularly for larger families, straight off the market. When we look at our priority needs list and the larger families that need class C properties, we just cannot purchase those from the market.

THE CHAIR: All of those 22 properties bought in the last year are class C adaptable properties?

Ms Gilding: No, well possibly not, because we cannot purchase class C adaptable. We are having to build them; that is the point. So we can purchase some that will meet that express demand, but I guess what I am saying is the majority of the demand that we are seeing on our waiting list will need to be met through a constructions program where we have our design brief and our guidelines that actually deliver the product that meets the needs of the people who are on our waiting list, many of whom, over 50 per cent, have a disability; many of whom are old; and many of whom are single household people. Those are the types of properties that we need.

THE CHAIR: Based on that, I should not expect Housing ACT to acquire from the market more than about somewhere between 20 and 30 properties in the next financial year?

Ms Gilding: On the overall program the acquisitions part, so the original program was 1,200 which was then added to through COVID in response to the need, but the overall—that first part was 140 acquisitions. So they will be delivered over the next two years; they will either be purchased through the market or come through our expression of interest process whereby we purchase construction from another builder. So they are already set in terms of their delivery. The 140 we were going to purchase are already in the pipeline and already committed to in terms of their delivery dates, as such.

If I could just go back in terms of what we are seeing in terms of prices and the market prices, whilst we are seeing a softening in the market, in terms of its realisation in our sales program, what we are experiencing at the moment is it is taking longer to sell but we are still realising a sales price that is covering our construction costs. So because we are building, buying, selling in the same market, that is actually breaking even. When we did the first modelling back in 2018, there is contingency within the program and so at the moment it is tracking well in terms of revenue covering costs for that.

THE CHAIR: I have to ask you this one quick question, because you brought up expressions of interest from property developers and property sellers. How many incoming expressions or people interested in talking about that program have you had in the last 12 months?

Ms Gilding: I would have to take that on notice. On the life of the program, it would probably be about a dozen to 15 in terms of actually coming through that process.

THE CHAIR: Would you mind taking on notice these three: how many expressions of interest you have had over the life of the program; how many you have had in the last 12 months; and how much we paid to promote the expressions of interest program in marketing, advertising and the like?

Ms Gilding: Certainly. I will take those three questions on notice.

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Ms Berry: I would have to say the business or the building sector in the ACT are very well-aware of the growth and renewal program and that they have been part of the discussions from the start of the previous program in delivering the 1,288 and for this program. I am happy to provide the question—get some advice on notice, but, you know, it does not really need a lot of marketing.

Ms Gilding: No.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, minister and officials, for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, and there have been a few, if you could provide those answers to the Committee Support office within five working days. If any other member of the Assembly wishes to lodge a question on notice based on today's proceedings, please provide those to the committee secretary within five working days of the hearing. Today's hearing is now adjourned.

Hearing suspended from 1.02 to 3.03 pm.

Appearances:

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

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Aigner, Mr Geoff, Executive Branch Manager Client Services, Housing ACT

Akhter, Ms Sanzida, Acting Executive Branch Manager Housing and Homelessness Programs, Housing ACT

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon everybody and welcome back to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on health and community wellbeing's ongoing inquiry into annual and financial reports 2021-2022. My name is Johnathan Davis and I am the Chair of this committee. The proceedings in this session will examine the annual reports of the Community Service Directorate. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge we meet today on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

On the first occasion that you speak, please acknowledge that you have read and understood the privilege statement. Should you take a question on notice today, please do say clearly that you will take that question on notice; that will help our committee secretary follow up with you after the hearing for those answers.

In this first session this afternoon, we will be hearing from the Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services, Minister Rebecca Vassarotti, and officials.

Minister, and officials, good afternoon and welcome.

Minister, could I ask that you start by acknowledging that you have read and understood the privilege statement?

Ms Vassarotti: I have, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Tremendous. Minister, my reading of annual reports, suggests that we are spending more on specialist homelessness services in this city than we ever have before. If my research is not mistaken, we are spending more on specialist homelessness services as a proportion of our income than any other government in country, second only to the Northern Territory, yet our homelessness rate is increasing. Could you proffer any wisdom as to why that might be? What are the government's next actions in this space?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Davis, for the question. It is certainly true that we are investing very heavily in our specialist services sector, and that is a trend that has been going on for a little while, particularly since COVID and particularly since the commencement of this term of government. There is a commitment to spend an additional \$18 million in homelessness services sector, and we have been investing heavily in a range of initiatives, such as standing up new homelessness services and

providing new options, particularly around more flexible funding, as well as providing additional base funding for the homelessness sector, which was the first time that they had seen a real increase to their base funding in almost 10 years. So there is a significant investment that is occurring. I am not sure where we sit in terms of jurisdictions, but I know that it has been a significant investment, something that I am particularly proud of, and something that we have really needed.

As you note, in terms of the issues around homelessness, like in all jurisdictions around Australia, the pressure and the issues around housing affordability and housing stress and homelessness are really, really, significant. So this is something that we are not going to turn around overnight. This is something that will take sustained effort. A key thing that we are doing in terms of looking at that sustained effort is really engaging with the homelessness services sector to work with them in terms of identifying, at a system level, what is working and what are areas that we need to improve on—where the gaps are.

Over the last 18 months, we have been working through a significant co-design process with specialist homelessness services in terms of commissioning. We have sort of hit a significant milestone in relation to that in terms of moving into the investment phase. So this is a process which will identify how we support the system to respond to the gaps. We are seeing increased complexity within the service system. And so this is something that again we have been working on for some time, particularly in terms of looking at how we bring a trauma-informed process.

For the ACT, because we are a small system and because we actually are pretty good at identifying who are the people that are facing homelessness, is that we actually have a really good handle on our population of people who are sleeping rough and homeless and the complexity that they are facing. So particularly when you look at jurisdictional comparisons, we often look like we are doing badly where the reality is that we know that, in comparison, the people that we are working with have got higher levels of vulnerability and complexity, and we are confident that we have a very good handle on the scale of the issue here in this jurisdiction in a way that other jurisdictions may struggle with. That is a very long answer. But I just did want to look to officials just to see if there is any other insights that we can provide in relation to that, you know, really fair question.

THE CHAIR: That is all right. I think that is actually a pretty fair answer, to me. Minister, I understand almost all people that we support who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are recipients of income support payments from the federal government. We know unfortunately a political choice has been made by governments of both persuasions to keep those people on payments below the Henderson poverty line. What is the ACT government doing and what can the ACT government do when the services that we are funding are to support people who are, by nature of their income support payments, living in poverty?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes look, it is a really significant challenge, and I think it is never starker than when it comes to the issue of housing. If you are in receipt of an income support payment it is practically impossible to operate within the private rental market. When we look at a per capita basis, we do okay in terms of affordability, but when you are on poverty level payments, it makes it very difficult. That is a structural issue that

we have to respond to and we do not have the ability to change it, from our perspective.

In terms of how we support people, it is looking at how we grow the ability to provide particular income-based rental. We are working really hard to grow that pool in a challenging context, particularly with the issues around the construction industry and even extreme weather. So we look to do that.

Our concessions program is a really significant way that we can provide support with other mechanisms. The utility concessions are probably a good example of a way that we can provide material support in other areas that are adjacent to housing but are actually not directly dealing with that issue.

Again, I will look to officials if there is any additional information that we can provide.

Ms Gilding: I think you have covered it.

MR PARTON: My question relates to sub-letting. It has come to our attention that there are some public housing tenants who appear to abuse the system and sub-let houses while living elsewhere. Now, I am not suggesting that this is an endemic problem, but I think it is probably more widespread than a lot of people would believe. Some of these tenants appear to have multiple public housing properties, which just seems difficult to get your head around. Minister, I wonder if you can advise, through either you or officials, what process occurs when a sub-letting concern is raised? What happens when someone reports to Housing a possible sub-letting in a Housing ACT asset?

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks, Mr Parton, for the question.

And I think an issue such as that, would be looked at in the context of our general complaints and feedback mechanism. So I will look, probably to Mr Aigner to provide some detail in terms of how we would manage that issue specifically and the context in which, you know, those sorts of issues and complaints would be dealt with.

Mr Aigner: I have read the privilege statement and understand it.

As the minister said, this is dealt with like any other complaint. We, in the client services branch, monitor our complaints and have certain KPIs on how quickly we process and deal with complaints. So it sits within that kind of management timeframe.

So that will generally mean a senior engagement officer, or housing manager as we call them, will go out to the property and try and engage with the tenant. Sometimes these things are picked up through client services visits. These are very rare occurrences. I think I have heard about two in my time in this role. And as you have pointed out, Mr Parton, they are—

MR PARTON: So when you said two, you mean two that have arisen from a client service visit or two holus-bolus?

Mr Aigner: Two accusations.

MR PARTON: Right.

Mr Aigner: They are notoriously difficult to track.

MR PARTON: Yes.

Mr Aigner: But I do not agree with the proposition that they are a widespread occurrence, unless you have some data that we do not.

MR PARTON: So what occurs to tenants who are found to be sub-letting? What is the consequence of that if indeed that is proven to be correct?

Mr Aigner: Like I said, this is a very rare occurrence, and I am just dragging back from my memory. So from memory what we do on that is issue a notice to remedy—so asking for a tenant to reoccupy. There are further steps we can go through if we feel that rents have been charged, and then we are kind of getting into a police matter, really.

MR PARTON: Is it possible to take on notice the number of instances that sub-letting was found to have occurred in a Housing ACT asset in the last 12 months?

Mr Aigner: Absolutely—

MR PARTON: Thank you.

Mr Aigner: We will take that on notice, Mr Parton.

MR PARTON: Thank you, Mr Aigner.

DR PATERSON: Minister, I asked Minister Berry this question earlier and was directed to you. So in the *ACT Housing Strategy* it says:

In 2016-17, 1315 children and young people under the age of 18 sought assistance from specialist homelessness services.

I was wondering what the current or most up to date figure of young people who are accessing homelessness services in the ACT?

Ms Vassarotti: I will look to officials to provide that data. Just to note that certainly children and young people are clients of homelessness services, either with the parent or sometimes on their own. So we do find a range of specialist services that do provide particular and tailored services for children and young people. We see this as a really important area; we do need to really foster and support really great support for young people who find themselves in the situation of homelessness. But certainly we do not want this to be the beginning of a lifelong pattern of homelessness. If we can provide a range of wraparound services, we are able to intervene early and ensure that they get the supports that they need for this to not become an ongoing issue.

But I will look to Ms Akhter.

Ms Akhter: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

So in trying to answer that question, I guess, you know, over the past three years the numbers of young people supported by homelessness services in the ACT has actually reduced by 2.4 per cent, from 776 in 2018-19, to 772 in 2019-20, to then 757 in 2021. This is pretty similar, trend wise, as we observe nationally, which is around a three per cent reduction in the number of young clients across Australia. While the number of young males reduced over the past two years, we also note that the number of young females increased during the same period.

As the minister mentioned, in looking at what the needs of young people are and at the service gaps, we are engaging with the sector as part of Commissioning, which is a strategic partnership where we are co-designing the future of our homelessness services including the youth sector. We have great insight around how we could improve the service into future. And we have captured that in an insight report, which is obviously available on CSD's Commissioning website.

If we look into what we have been doing over the last financial year and also currently, we are investing around \$6.5 million in nine services to support young people. These services provide a range of different services, including supported accommodation programs, such as Our Place and the Youth Emergency Accommodation Network, and support only programs, such as the Gugan Gulwan family support program—I have a list of all the nine programs there.

So that is what we are doing now, in addition to looking into working with Major Projects Canberra and CIT in the design of the youth foyer accommodation as part of the new CIT precinct in Woden. The youth foyer will provide 20 new accommodation places for young people engaged in education and training programs.

And as part of the homelessness Commissioning process, we will also be looking at further co-designing early in the new year how we can look at clients with complex needs. That cohort will also include youth. Because we want to put a particular focus on the young people experiencing a range of complexities there.

In addition, we also have a project currently that is running where Housing ACT and Child Youth Protection Services are working together in a partnership to increase housing options for young people transitioning to adulthood from out of home care. Under this arrangement, we have already provided five properties for young people who are transitioning to independent living.

So that is just a range of activities and support programs that we have in place to support the youth sub-sector, noting that we will be working further with the sub-sector as part of the future Commissioning co-design process.

DR PATERSON: Great. Do you have any insights into why there has been an increase in young girls or young females experiencing homelessness?

Ms Akhter: That is something that we have to unpack a little bit further. But, as I said, it is pretty much in line with the trend that is happening nationally. We could perhaps consider COVID as a factor there, where there have been a range of measures that we put in place, including, you know, in every state and jurisdiction to support this cohort.

But I do not have a readily available answer to that question.

DR PATERSON: Sure. Of the 757, or thereabouts, young people experiencing homelessness, do we know the extent of how many are sort of a temporary homelessness? They might be couch-surfing or that type of thing. And how many need actual accommodation long term?

Ms Vassarotti: I will look to officials to see what information that we have. I think what we are really doing is looking at the service system in terms of getting in early to ensure that that does not happen. And I think that not that long ago you were at the opening of a service over in Molonglo. That is really looking at providing a little bit of respite for young people, you know, even prior—like when they are sort of having a tough time—so they do not actually have to get into the cycle of accessing a specific specialist homelessness service. Again, I will look to see if we have any specific data, particularly around repeat experiences of homelessness.

Ms Akhter: We do not have that particular breakdown.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

DR PATERSON: That is all right. Thank you.

MR PARTON: I am referring to the homelessness strategy released a week or so ago, which was good to see.

Ms Vassarotti: The investment strategy?

MR PARTON: The new homelessness strategy that was released on 31 October.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

MR PARTON: The strategy and research completed to form the strategy raised some concerns for us. Page 7 of the strategic investment plan outlines six key insights from the engagement process, including greater flexibility to respond to individual needs and goals, and support for complex and vulnerable clients. What has changed, or what is likely to change, following that process to implement those two strategies?

Ms Vassarotti: Sorry, can you repeat the question? What has changed in terms of—

MR PARTON: So page 7 of this particular strategy—

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. It talks about the drivers.

MR PARTON: indicates that you will be implementing greater flexibility to respond to individual needs and goals and support for complex and vulnerable clients. It just sounds like a wonderful statement, but I just want to know on the ground in terms of actual outcomes, what is likely to change in your engagement process to implement those two strategies?

Ms Vassarotti: Okay. Thank you for the question. Sorry, I needed to clarify it.

So look this insight has really come from the work that we have been doing with the sector and a lot of the learnings that we had through COVID. So, you know, particularly some of the programs that we were able to identify, such as the flexible client funds, were a way that we were really able to test this concept. Services said that that was a really useful process. But, as we touched on before, particularly around responding to the issue of complexity, while we had some really fantastic feedback from services in relation to some of those issues, at this stage we believe that we need to do more work with the sector around co-designing exactly what that means and how we deliver more flexibility so we can really be outcomes based.

So the Commissioning process is actually an example of what will change. We are not doing a traditional procurement process; it is a much more nuanced process that we are rolling through where we will do “Engagement with services 101” in terms of identifying what we are trying to achieve in terms of outcomes rather than what we are trying to buy in terms of beds.

MR PARTON: So the short answer is you do not really know? You identify that there are some problems, and I say this with the greatest of respect; I am not having a slap here. I am saying the short answer is you do not really know, “We have identified that there are these problems, but we do not really know at this stage how we are going to fix them”.

Ms Rule: Yes. It is kind of the point, though, that we—

THE CHAIR: Just one second. Mr Parton, is there a question at the end of that?

MR PARTON: Yes. There is a question mark at the end of that statement saying, “I am assuming your statement means, ‘We do not really know,’” and I think Ms Rule was about to give me an answer.

Ms Rule: The point is that we partner with those who know best, is how I would characterise that. So instead of a traditional approach of funding outputs, so \$10 times 10 things; we found \$100 and it is actually give \$100 to a service provider and say, “How can you use that to best effect to reduce homelessness?”. So it is shifting the way in which we fund services. It is a contemporary way of doing social service delivery in lots of contexts, and so it is about partnering with those who do know best about what is needed on the ground to solve problems.

Ms Vassarotti: I think the other thing that we have really learned through the COVID process is that things change and contexts change and the system needs to be responsive. Again, that is one of the really beneficial things and one of the reasons why we really have been able to move to a different level of relationship with our community sector partners—we have been able to be agile and responsive. So we are trying to create a system in which we start the relationship on that basis, and it is an ongoing relationship where we can respond much more easily to different contexts, as we have done over the last period of time.

Why we are continuing to work with the sector, one of the benefits of what we have done over the last few years around things such as the client support fund is that it

appears that to have the ability to be more flexible, to respond to particular clients, is a really useful addition to the service system. That is not something that we had prior to introducing that. So there will probably be some specific streams of work, but it is also around how we engage with our service partners as well.

MR PARTON: All right. I look forward to some positive outcomes in that space. I will be watching closely. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Minister, over the course of the last year—in fact, for most of my time as a member of this place—constituents would make representations to me, and no doubt other members, when they have a neighbour engaging unneighbourly behaviour. Sometimes that neighbour is a public housing tenant. Sometimes, unfortunately, in this place that has been amplified and publicised in a way that risks stigmatising and demonising that public housing tenant, something that would never happen to a private home owner or somebody renting on the private market. Can you talk me through what supports the directorate provides to public housing tenants when they have been the subject of a complaint for behaviour?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes, thank you for the question. Again I might look to Mr Aigner to go through the details of how that process plays out. I think we have said in this place a number of times before public housing tenants often are scrutinised in a way and at a level that the rest of the community are not.

In terms of Housing's engagement on the range of issues, people will most often be engaging because they are having lived experience of particular issues, and so that is important, but actually ensuring that there is a good understanding of the information and there is fair justice provided to all parties is really important. So I will look to Mr Aigner just to provide some further detail about how that plays out on a practical level.

Mr Aigner: Thank you for the question, Mr Davis. As I indicated before, these kinds of things go through a complaints process. Unlike a private landlord, there are a number of considerations that we have in our mind as we are managing these kinds of complaints. We are thinking about human rights; we are thinking about privacy. Probably unlike a private landlord, we do not begin with a philosophy or an approach of admonishing or warning; we begin with an approach of understanding and trying to mediate or remediate. That will mean practically that when we receive a complaint, a housing manager will begin by engaging with the tenant, and that may stop there. In engaging with neighbours, sometimes we need to think about safety and confidentiality issues, and the managers seek to do that within a short period of time. The KPI around that is 21 days because we do not want a lack of response to a complaint to lead to another complaint. More often than not there is some kind of resolution that the housing manager is able to mediate with the tenant or with the community around.

When it goes beyond that, then we are really working within the Residential Tenancy Act and we may have to issue a warning, a notice to remedy or a notice to vacate. But like I said, it all comes down to trying to understand and resolve. Often that may mean we connect a tenant to other supports. Sometimes there is an escalation within our own process to what we call our TSCCOs, our tenancy support community connection officers, who will look to maybe domestic violence services or whatever else is suitable

to help that tenant at that time. They will also try to understand whether the issue is episodic or is it a long-term issue, and that will also lead to a different type of response.

THE CHAIR: Have there been any instances in the last financial year where Housing ACT has had to evict a tenant because of unneighbourly behaviour complaints, not necessarily rent arrears or other issues, but specifically those sorts of complaints?

Mr Aigner: I think it is also in the annual report, Mr Davis. Six items have gotten to a stage where we were able to issue a warrant. Four of those were turned over at the last minute by ACAT. We were able to find some remediation. Of the two that remain, I think one of those was an antisocial behaviour issue, but I would need to check that.

THE CHAIR: Happy to take that on notice?

Mr Aigner: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

DR PATERSON: Minister, you just said that you seek fair justice for all parties involved in complaints. I have engaged with constituents who are both public housing residents and also those who are not public housing residents that have had substantial issues, yet they, being the complainant, have had very little or no engagement in the complaints process; it is just: “We’re doing something. We can’t tell you anything. Privacy reasons.” The person who has a complaint gets increasingly disenfranchised with the process and frustrated with the system because these incidents that are quite serious keep on happening and their lives are quite significantly impacted by the behaviours of others. I am interested if you could clarify on what fair justice for all parties actually means.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. So, in relation to public housing tenants or any tenants, the issues need to be dealt with within a legislative framework. The reality is that privacy is a key consideration that we need to respond to. In the engagement that we have within offices, we acknowledge the frustration that comes with privacy and really try to work within those boundaries to provide as much information as we can.

DR PATERSON: I just stop you there for a second. It is not really that people want information. They want the problem resolved and they are just happy to know that things are being resolved, and I think there are ways that we could tell people that things are being resolved without disclosing anything of privacy or individual’s details.

Ms Vassarotti: The advice that we provide is advice that we can provide in the bounds of legislation, particularly in terms of working through Residential Tenancies Act. There are specific escalations that we need to work through, but it is not actually appropriate in many cases to be talking to a third party about the fact that we are going through a legal process. It is the reality of the system that we work within, and I might look to officials in terms of being able to provide some additional information in relation to that, but it is an issue where we actually have to look at all parties. Recognising that there are frustrations in not being able to tell the detail of what is going on in a particular case, there are actually really good reasons for that.

Mr Aigner: I am not sure how much more I could add, but within the bounds of privacy that our housing managers operate in, we do engage with neighbours surrounding the alleged issue. I should say there are many instances where there is no issue and neighbours are targeting a tenant. So we need to be really mindful of that. We try and communicate with complainants within privacy in the best way we can, and I think there is often a conflation of “Not getting the resolution I wanted” versus “we are communicating with you”. We are communicating; it just may not have been what you wanted to hear, and often there is an expectation, “Because this is a public housing tenant and you are public housing, you should be able to just move that tenant on,” and we do not have those powers, as you know.

DR PATERSON: Yes. I am also speaking for people who are public housing tenants themselves and have experienced significant antisocial behaviour from other tenants. I guess what I am asking is just for basic customer service in terms of where someone raises a complaint to engage with them as opposed to either non-engagement or “We cannot engage because of privacy reasons,” because no-one wants to know the details. They just want the behaviour to stop.

Ms Vassarotti: I suggest that many people do. In terms of the correspondence we get, many people do feel that they have a right to have the information of other people that is of a very private nature, so that is certainly not the—

DR PATERSON: That is not the circumstance that I am talking about.

Minister Vassarotti: I think that these are real-life issues that certainly Housing officers deal with, and again I will look to officials, but it is actually the standard practice of housing managers to engage with complainants and provide as much detail as they are able to do within boundaries. So that is actually the standard practice. Absolutely would agree in terms of customer service we can never pretend that things will not sometimes go wrong and things will, and that is why we certainly really appreciate when there is engagement with other members’ offices, because sometimes when things fall through the crack, it comes to us that way, and that is a perfectly reasonable thing to do, but again I will look to—

THE CHAIR: Minister, this might be not necessarily in your portfolio, but stay with me because I need your help. If somebody owned their own home and were participating in antisocial unneighbourly behaviour, their neighbours’ only recourse would be law enforcement; correct?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

THE CHAIR: If somebody was a private tenant renting from a landlord, their neighbours’ only recourse, if they are engaging in antisocial behaviour, would be law enforcement, perhaps the private landlord or agent?

Ms Vassarotti: They would be covered by the same legislation as the public housing tenant in terms of the Residential Tenancies Act and so there are particular obligations that cover all tenants in relation to that, but who is looked on to mediate those issues often is quite different.

THE CHAIR: But I am just interested in the comparison to Dr Paterson's point. Do Housing ACT do more or less than what would happen in another setting where the tenant was occupying a privately-owned residence and was not a tenant of the territory?

Ms Vassarotti: Our view would be that particularly as a social landlord we do much more.

Mr Aigner: Absolutely; exceedingly more, if that is the right way of putting it. We do a lot to try and mediate the issue, and that is, I guess, where I began my answer, Mr Davis.

THE CHAIR: To clarify, I meant more around the people who have, for lack of a better word, a sense of entitlement to understand the remedies that you have implemented with the tenant engaging in antisocial behaviour in a way that they perhaps would not were they a private tenant or an owner-occupier. That is what I understand in terms of that. Do you believe that you provide more information to the complainant or less than if that tenant were an occupant of a private property or a homeowner?

Mr Aigner: Well, I think by even answering the question we are providing more information because we have acknowledged that the person is a public housing tenant, so right from the get-go there is more that we are doing.

MR PARTON: I think it is a really important line of questioning from Dr Paterson and I do not think it is a Palmerston issue at all, because I recall having a number of conversations with Ms Le Couteur about this very issue, and certainly in her time here she felt that we were not as a machine as a government dealing with this problem.

In regards to the number of complaints made in the last year, and I have gone through—

THE CHAIR: I hate to cut you off, Mr Parton, but I should just say I do not think it is orderly to potentially verbal a former member when they are not in the room to verify that that is their view. I mean, I will give you some leave with the preamble, but I think that is cheeky. You can go directly to the question.

MR PARTON: I do not believe Ms Le Couteur would have any problem with it at all.

THE CHAIR: Well, Ms Le Couteur is not here and I am chairing this meeting, so I am asking you not to verbal former members when they are not here to speak for themselves.

MR PARTON: Okay. I do note the table on page 107 shows disruptive behaviour complaints have gone down. Based on the feedback I get, I have just got to ask is that because people are getting sick and tired of complaining with no result?

Ms Vassarotti: There are probably a whole lot of drivers around why complaints might be going down. I am speculating at this point, so maybe I should look to officials. I think COVID would potentially have an impact in relation to the period where everyone was in their own homes and were highly stressed. That might have driven complaints up in the previous period and now some of those tensions have reduced, but I do not know if there has been any data in relation to why there might be a downward trend in

that area.

MR PARTON: If there is data, Mr Aigner will know.

Mr Aigner: Perhaps. Thank you for your optimism, Mr Parton.

I guess I would like to offer an alternate hypothesis, and that is that we have become a lot better at tracking how we are managing complaints. As I mentioned earlier, I think we have seen a reduction in the amount of complaints we are getting about complaints. So all of our housing managers know that we have 21 days to get out there and talk to people and understand a complaint, so I think we are getting a reduction in multiple complaints. We are much clearer, through a lot of the work we have done with our data on where complaints are coming from. How we have distributed tenants across our housing managers has changed in the last financial year. We now distribute tenancies based on complexity, which allows our housing managers time to spend with more complex tenants and more complex issues. So, yes, that would be my ultimate hypothesis, unless I am going to go and track every single one of these complaints and understand. It is hard to talk about an absence of something, but I think we are much better at tracking it and working with it. That would be my hypothesis, Mr Parton.

Ms Gilding: May I jump in very quickly because the Minister is right, as is—

THE CHAIR: I think this is the first occasion you have spoken in this session.

Ms Gilding: It is too. My apologies. I acknowledge the privilege statement.

If we step back a year back, pre-COVID, we will see that we did track up during COVID, precisely, I think, for the reasons the minister mentioned, but when we compare that number several years ago to the number now, there is a decrease. Well, there is a decrease between those two, so three years ago to now, which I believe is actually attributed to what Mr Aigner is saying. So, it is both.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will draw us to a close.

On behalf of the committee, thank you Minister Vassarotti and directorate staff for your attendance today. For those who took a question on notice, if you could please provide an answer to the committee secretary within five working days. To any other member of the Assembly watching up in their office who would like to lodge a question on notice, please also lodge those within five working days.

Today's hearing is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 3.45 pm.