



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2022–2023](#))

Members:

**MR J MILLIGAN (Chair)
MR M PETERSSON (Deputy Chair)**

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2023

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**Secretary to the committee:
Ms K Langham (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.....1

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 3.10 pm.

Appearances:

Davidson, Ms Emma, Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services,
Minister for Disability, Minister for Justice Health, Minister for Mental Health,
Minister for Veterans and Seniors

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Evans, Ms Jacinta, Executive Group Manager, Strategic Policy

Perkins, Ms Anita, Executive Group Manager, Communities

Sabellico, Ms Anne Maree, Executive Group Manager, Children, Youth and
Families

Stathis, Mr Nick, Executive Branch Manager, Office for Disability, Seniors and
Veterans and Social Recovery, Communities

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2022-23. The committee will today examine the annual reports of the Community Services Directorate.

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

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

You all have a pink slip in front of you outlining the conditions of privilege within this committee. When you first speak, can you please confirm that you agree to that. It would be very useful. Protections and obligations are afforded by parliamentary privilege. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. When you do speak, please confirm that you understand these implications and that you agree with and will comply with them.

I welcome Ms Emma Davidson, Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services, and officials. As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed straight to questions. I will pass my first question over to Ms Lee.

MS LEE: Thank you, Chair. Minister, according to media reporting and the ACT Greens chief of staff's report of the handling of the serious allegations against Mr Davis, you were contacted by some staff on 29 October. Why did you not take that

to the Leader of the Greens as soon as possible?

Ms Davidson: Thank you for the question. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I was contacted by a staff member on that weekend, and we made an appointment to go and speak with a senior member of Minister Rattenbury's staff on Monday, 30 October at 8 o'clock in the morning. That was the first available opportunity to make sure that a senior member of staff knew what we had heard. At that point, we did not have any confirmed details of anything. We had just heard rumours, but we took it straight to a senior member of staff at the first available opportunity.

MS LEE: Why did you not take it straight to Mr Rattenbury, who is your cabinet colleague and the leader of your party?

Ms Davidson: When you are talking about a matter relating to HR or this kind of misconduct, our agreed process was to go straight to the most senior member of staff to ensure that proper processes could be followed.

MS LEE: That is even for misconduct alleged against MLAs?

Ms Davidson: What we did was take it straight to the most senior member of staff, who could ensure that the right processes were followed and that the right steps were taken as a result of hearing that information.

MS LEE: Did you discuss the matter with anyone else, aside from the chief of staff, in Minister Rattenbury's office?

Ms Davidson: No, I did not.

MS LEE: When did you first discuss these serious allegations with Mr Davis?

Ms Davidson: Mr Davis was notified that there were rumours circulating—which at that stage we did not have confirmation of the details of, and no person had come forward to speak to the organisation about—on the following Monday, when he returned to Canberra.

MS LEE: Who notified Mr Davis of those allegations?

Ms Davidson: There was a meeting with the senior member of staff. I was in the room for that meeting.

MS LEE: Just confirming that you had no contact with Mr Davis between 29 October and 6 November, when it was that meeting that you have just referred to?

Ms Davidson: Not of that nature. Because he was away from Canberra for that week and he was attending work business, I had done what I often do and just checked in with him to say, "Hey, how is your week going?" That was it.

MS LEE: You did not discuss these serious allegations with him during that check-in?

Ms Davidson: No, I did not.

MS LEE: Which method of communication did you use for that check-in, and what day was that?

Ms Davidson: I would have texted him. I honestly could not tell you what day it was. It was sometime during that week.

MS LEE: Are you able to provide that on notice? I am assuming you would have records of text messages and times and dates.

Ms Davidson: Yes, I can do that.

MS LEE: Thank you. The report that was written by Mr Rattenbury's chief of staff says on the first page, about halfway down:

We were concerned that if we were to contact him directly over the phone, he may attempt to contact any alleged victims and remove evidence.

What was the basis for your forming of that opinion?

Ms Davidson: At that point in time, what we had were rumours that had been circulated that we had no confirmed details about. What the staff member did—and I supported them in doing this—was at the first available opportunity after hearing those rumours take it to the most senior member of staff, who could then ensure that proper processes were followed to determine the right course of action.

MS LEE: That is not answering my question. What made you form the basis that—and I quote; this is directly from the report—Mr Davis “may attempt to contact any alleged victims and remove evidence”?

Ms Davidson: You are asking me a question about what is in the mind of another person.

MS LEE: No; it is your mind. It says you had that conclusion.

Ms Davidson: No. Actually, I was not the investigator on this. I supported the staff member—

MS LEE: It says “we”. The whole way through, it says, “Ms Davidson and I,” “Ms Davidson and I.” Are you disputing that?

Ms Davidson: I was present for those meetings, but that was the process of ensuring that the information was passed on to the most senior member of staff, who could then complete the process.

MS LEE: The report says, “Ms Davidson and I,” “Ms Davidson and I,” and then it says “we”. You are not the “we”?

Ms Davidson: We made it clear to the staff members involved that if they had any information about any illegal activity it would need to be referred to police. I was there and was part of that process, but—

MS LEE: I will ask you in a different way. Did you and do you have concerns that, if Mr Davis had been told whilst he was away, he would have contacted alleged victims and tried to delete evidence?

Ms Davidson: I honestly could not tell you what was in the mind of the—

MS LEE: I am not asking about anyone's mind. I am asking you.

Ms Davidson: manager who was involved.

MS LEE: I am asking you. What was in your mind? Can you tell us that?

Ms Davidson: These were not my decisions to make.

MS LEE: This report says that you were concerned, so I am asking you. Were you concerned?

Ms Davidson: It was my role to ensure that all of the information that we had heard was passed on to the appropriate person. That is what I wanted to ensure.

MS LEE: Did you have concerns?

Ms Davidson: That is what I wanted to ensure—

MS LEE: I am asking you a direct question now. Did you have concerns, at the time, that that could happen?

Ms Davidson: That was not something that I remember discussing. The point of the conversations was to ensure that any information that we had heard was passed on to someone who could act on that information. That should not be me.

MS LEE: How was it not you? On what basis do you say that it should not be you?

Ms Davidson: The appropriate person to be passing that information onto is someone who can then act on that information and make sure that the proper processes are followed. A senior manager in the organisation is someone who would know what the right processes are.

MS LEE: Minister, are you aware of your obligations for mandatory reporting of potential child sex offences?

Ms Davidson: Yes, and the organisation ensured that all of the referrals were made as soon as information became available in order to make those referrals.

MS LEE: And—

THE CHAIR: We might just have one more supplementary to that, and then I will offer it to the rest of the table.

MS LEE: Sure. Thank you. In your capacity as Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services, you did not think that you had any obligation to report it? You just thought that it had to be given to the relevant people to report. Is that what you are saying to the committee?

Ms Davidson: I want to be very clear about this. The information that I had was a rumour that I had heard, several steps removed from someone with firsthand information about it. I passed that information on to the appropriate person, supporting the staff member who had brought it to me to have that meeting with the senior manager involved in this report. I did not actually have any details that confirmed any of the information or identified anyone. All I had was what the staff member had brought to me, and we then passed it on to a senior manager.

MS LEE: Am I allowed to keep going?

THE CHAIR: Ms Lee, you have one more and then we will go to Mr Pettersson.

MS LEE: Thank you, Chair. What was the nature of the allegations that came to you on 29 October?

Ms Davidson: It is actually detailed in the report that you have been reading from. There were rumours about engaging in inappropriate behaviour and the possible ages of the people that had been involved.

MS LEE: Between 15 and 17?

Ms Davidson: Yes: the possible ages of the people that had been involved, as a rumour.

MS LEE: I am not going to push my luck, but I have got more. I will wait until Mr Pettersson has asked his questions.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you. I have also read this internal review and I am confused by a couple of elements. On Sunday 29 October, you texted the chief of staff to say that you had a serious matter and needed to have a meeting at 8 am the next day. In that meeting there were four people?

Ms Davidson: Yes; that is correct.

MR PETTERSSON: What was the role of those four individuals? It was you, the chief of staff—

Ms Davidson: Yes, the staff member who had brought the information to me in the first place.

MR PETTERSSON: Was that one staff member or two?

Ms Davidson: There were two staff members present in that meeting. It is in the report.

MR PETTERSSON: The report says “two other staff members let me know that there were rumours circulating about Mr Davis”. So there were two staff members that were aware of the rumours?

Ms Davidson: Yes, and that is what is in the report.

MR PETTERSSON: Right. Were they the staff members that informed you of the rumours?

Ms Davidson: Yes.

MR PETTERSSON: Did they inform you at the same time?

Ms Davidson: No. One of the staff members informed me, but both of them came to the meeting.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, how far along is the development of a social recovery framework to support the ACT community in possible future emergency events?

Ms Davidson: Knowing that we have moved into a different weather cycle now, there has been significant work done on social recovery preparation. Are you asking about the upcoming season or are you asking about social recovery work more generally, like the social recovery framework?

MR PETTERSSON: Both would be great.

Ms Davidson: Okay. On the social recovery framework, there was funding in the budget to do this piece of work. CSD have been leading that process. I will pass to Catherine Rule in a moment, who can speak more to the detail of where that is up to. They have been doing quite a significant amount of work with the community sector and with the community more broadly to understand what our needs are in regard to social recovery from disasters, as opposed to immediate emergency response, and to understand where there might be work that we can do to better prepare in future. I will pass to Catherine Rule, who can speak more about that.

Ms Rule: Thanks, Minister. I have read and understand the privilege statement. As the minister said, we received some money in the budget to support work on an ACT social recovery framework. That work is underway. So far, we have completed desktop research to look at what has happened here in the ACT and in other jurisdictions. We have conducted three co-design workshops with community partners and government agencies, which were very well attended by a whole range of stakeholders. That consultation, particularly with the community organisations, is ongoing as we refine the framework and the findings from the co-design workshops.

We have currently got a YourSay survey in the field seeking community views, which will close on 17 November. We have got additional work underway throughout this month to complete the community consultations, the listening report and those types

of things. We are on track to deliver an ACT social recovery framework report, and a whole range of recommendations coming to us from that work, in February next year. That is really setting us up for the long term. In the immediate term we are making sure that we are ready to go, in the event of any disaster over this high-risk weather season.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. Thank you.

MS CLAY: Have you taken any special measures, given the nature of the high-risk fire season that is facing us?

Ms Rule: Not in addition to work that we would normally do. It is just planning and making sure that we are engaged in the exercises across government. Social recovery is part of a broader emergency response framework. The consultation on the framework has allowed us to engage pretty extensively with some of our community partners, because we are not the only ones who deliver services in a social recovery context during a disaster, as well as learning from events in the past.

We have done things like make sure that we have staff ready to go, from executive down, so that through all layers of the organisation we will have hands on deck. We are getting an emergency reserve of CSD staff ready and waiting, to make sure that we can respond pretty rapidly in the event of an emergency, should we need to. I feel pretty confident that we are prepared for this season. The framework is, I think, setting us up for further clarity into the future about roles and responsibilities, for CSD but also other parts of government and the community sector and other stakeholders who might have something to contribute.

MS CLAY: Having been through disasters that have tested us so robustly, between COVID and the 2019-20 Black Summer, what lessons have we now applied to deal with the next one?

Ms Rule: Some of the feedback we get from our community partners and other parts of government is about the need for clarity on who is responsible for what. There is an immediate emergency response that the emergency services agencies are responsible for, but, for example, with the superstorms in Belconnen we learnt a lot about who is responsible for the removal of a tree versus who is responsible for ensuring that people who have lost power and do not have access to refrigeration can get access to food. Regarding those sorts of things, it has been important for everybody to understand where the responsibilities lie. That is one of the biggest pieces of feedback we have had from our stakeholders. Understanding who has to do what makes it easier for us to respond when the time comes.

MS CLAY: Sure. Have we got some clear public interface on that? It is hard sometimes for the agencies to know who is doing what, but it is even harder for the people affected to know who to call.

Ms Rule: Yes. I am happy for Ms Perkins or Mr Stathis to jump in here. A lot of this work, as I said, has been about clarifying those roles and responsibilities.

Ms Perkins: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. In terms of the

public interface, we work very much with our whole-of-government partners. In any emergency environment we would be working through the whole-of-government arrangements for coordinated communications. We do preparedness with them, in anticipation of the season, being pre-prepared with the messaging that we may need to do. A lot of work goes on, in an ongoing way, to make sure that we are prepared, but we are also working hand in glove with those whole-of-government arrangements.

MS CLAY: Thank you. Minister, we have raised the age of criminal responsibility. Tell me what that means for youth justice here.

Ms Davidson: That is a really important piece of work, not just for the small number of young people between 10 and 13 years of age who would have otherwise ended up in the youth justice system each year but for future generations to come. One of the things we know is that there are sometimes intergenerational components to the complexities and difficulties those families are dealing with and if we do not find ways to resolve them they will continue to cause problems for their whole family.

One of the important things about raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility is getting better services in place to support those children and young people and their families and carers to resolve those issues. For me, it is not just about the number in the Crimes Act and it is not solved just because we have raised the age. Now the real work really begins, in getting good services in place that can deal with some problems that we have known for decades have needed to be worked on but we just have not had the capacity to do it.

One of the really helpful things in last year's budget was getting some funding in there to start doing that work. We will continue to see that in future budgets as well, I expect. There will be this investment in good health and social services. It is about mental health, domestic and family violence support, trauma services, disability and allied health services, homelessness solutions and drug and alcohol support. It is a really tricky thing when you are talking about those kinds of service needs for someone as young as 10 years old, but that is something that does occasionally happen. It is really good to think that we have a future in Canberra where those young people will be able to access those things.

MS CLAY: It is great to hear about that comprehensive suite of what we need. How will we know when we are doing it well? What is the sign of success on these programs?

Ms Davidson: One of the signs of success of these programs is that we will see those children and young people and their families engaged with services. We may see a relatively small number of families engaging with some quite intensive kinds of support services. On the one hand, you might look at the numbers in future years in annual reports and say, "Why are more people accessing these services?" It is because they can actually get more effective outcomes through accessing mental health, drug and alcohol, family support and homelessness services than the outcomes they would have got if they had ended up in the justice system. It is actually going to be a good thing to see that those people will be accessing those services.

We are also likely to see an impact on what happens as those young people grow

older. Are they engaging in behaviour that is harmful to themselves or risky for other people in the community around them that might have brought them into contact with the justice system? If we can get these services in place sooner then we will have fewer people over the age of 14, as well, who might be engaging in that kind of behaviour. That has impacts for the justice system. This is a really important aspect of what we are doing. That is why I am talking about the transformational intergenerational change that we can make here.

MS CLAY: It must be hard to measure the number of people accessing services, given that I imagine some people will be accessing multiple services and some people might need multiple types of support at once. Have you got any methods to track that while respecting people's confidentiality?

Ms Davidson: Yes. Prevention work is a really difficult thing to measure. If we are going to be serious about a human rights jurisdiction that takes into account that wellbeing indicators framework in how we do our decision-making around policies and programs, having a way of understanding what is working is really important. It is also important to know that we are doing something that has not been done in a lot of other jurisdictions before. In going all the way to 14 years, we are the first to have legislated that. Hopefully, other jurisdictions will be able to learn from what we are doing, but we will also be able to learn from what they are doing as they follow the ACT's lead in taking the steps to go all the way to the age of 14 and getting those good services in place.

MS CLAY: How many others are following us at this stage?

Ms Davidson: I am hopeful that they will see the success of what we are doing and that that will give them some more confidence. It would be great if New South Wales were able to go in the same direction, given how close they are and that porous border that we have between the ACT and New South Wales. They will have to deal with the same kinds of programs and services that we are having to deal with. We have recently had some national youth justice awards. Catherine Rule might want to speak some more about the kinds of programs and work that was recognised through those awards recently.

Ms Rule: I might pass to one of my colleagues to talk about that. But I would note, Ms Clay, that the Northern Territory has certainly indicated their intent to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility. In discussions with my state and territory colleagues at various commonwealth state forums, I know people are watching and interested in what we are doing here whilst they think about this policy issue in their own jurisdictions.

Ms Sabellico: I acknowledge the privilege statement and have read it. I am going to talk a bit more about the Australasian Youth Justice Acknowledgement Day that was celebrated on 16 October. Our awards day was on 17 October in the ACT. We celebrated that by distributing about 16 awards to people who have been working in the youth justice space. A couple of those awards went to people who are doing more assertive outreach and are able to connect with young people where they are congregating, where they are meeting, and reconnect them to services. We have seen great success in terms of doing that sort of work early enough when you are able to

look at connecting them to the services that they need rather than waiting for them to reach a crisis. There were a couple of awards that were really focused on acknowledging that. That work feeds into what we hope to do under raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility: expand those sorts of services so we can actually have more of the approach of being able to deliver services rather than wait for the crisis to escalate and then deal with it with more of an intervention.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

CHAIR: There are no other supplementaries on that topic. Ms Lee, on a substantive.

MS LEE: Thank you, Chair. Minister, the nature of the complaints that were brought to you on 29 October involved two staff members. Were they reported to you on 29 October?

Ms Davidson: What was reported to me was a rumour about which we had no clear facts or contact details for who has been involved. All of the information that the staff member brought to me was then passed on to a senior member of staff to take the appropriate action and follow the right process at the first available opportunity, at 8 o'clock on the Monday morning.

MS LEE: Yes, but, in terms of the staff members who brought it to you, that was on the Sunday? I am just confirming.

Ms Davidson: That was on the Saturday afternoon, and I spent Sunday getting an appointment time for them to be able to take it to a senior member of staff.

MS LEE: So it was Saturday of that weekend. In terms of the nature of that information, you clearly had sufficient concerns as you wanted to pass it on to a senior staff member.

Ms Davidson: Absolutely.

MS LEE: According to the report, it included possible engagement of inappropriate behaviour of people between the ages of 15 and 17?

Ms Davidson: Yes; that is in the report that you are reading from.

MS LEE: That is a very, very serious allegation.

Ms Davidson: Yes; these were rumours about a very serious matter, and that is why we took action so quickly.

MS LEE: If, as you have stated in answer to my previous question, you are aware of your mandatory obligation, why did you make the decision not to go directly to the police at the time?

Ms Davidson: Because this was all of the information that I had. I did not have any contact details for any of the young people that we were talking about. What I had was a rumour about 15 to 17 years of age. That is all of the information I had, and that

was information that I had heard from a staff member, whom I supported in taking that to a senior member of staff to then take the appropriate action.

MS LEE: In relation to the report, it says that you met with the chief of staff in Mr Rattenbury's office on the Monday, 30 October, but also on the Tuesday, 31 October. Then the report goes straight to the meeting on Monday, 6 November. Between 31 October and 6 November, did you take any action?

Ms Davidson: My role in this process was to ensure that the staff member who had heard the information was able to provide that to a senior member of staff to follow the right process and take the appropriate action, and that is exactly what I did. When someone comes to you having heard a rumour about something as serious as this, it is very important to be able to provide support to someone who has had the courage to raise this with a person in my position.

MS LEE: My direct question is: between 31 October and 6 November, what action did you take?

Ms Davidson: You would probably best ask the person who had received the information or speak to—

MS LEE: I am asking about what action you took. You want me to ask somebody else about what action you took? I am asking you: what action did you take, if any?

Ms Davidson: I had taken the action that I needed to take in terms of supporting the staff member to report that information to a senior manager who could follow the correct process.

MS LEE: That has been now reported. It was reported on Monday 30 October. Between 31 October and Monday, 6 November, did you take any action?

Ms Davidson: I was not the investigator in this. It was not my—

MS LEE: I am not asking whether you were an investigator. Did you take any action? It could be no. I do not know. Did you take any action?

Ms Davidson: I had already taken the action in that I was supporting the staff member who had brought the information to me in order to report it to a senior manager who could then follow the correct process.

MS LEE: That was between 31 October and 6 November, was it?

Ms Davidson: That was the action that I took: ensuring that the staff member who had heard this information was supported in having provided it to the senior manager, who was then acting on it.

MS LEE: Which happened on 30 October?

Ms Davidson: That was the meeting that we had on 30 October.

MS LEE: My question, again, Minister, is: between 31 October and 6 November, did you take any action? And, if so, what was it?

Ms Davidson: No; I did not take any further action.

MS LEE: Thank you.

Ms Davidson: I had passed it on to the person who could take action on it, and my role was to ensure that the staff member was supported.

MS LEE: Had you, before any of the rumours that were brought to you on that Saturday, 28 October, heard any other rumours about inappropriate conduct by Mr Davis—at any point?

Ms Davidson: I had not heard any other rumours before that point about these kinds of allegations of inappropriate behaviour with young people.

MS LEE: Not including the inappropriate relationship with a staff member that Mr Rattenbury has previously given evidence about?

Ms Davidson: I had heard about that. That was something that I had heard about, and I understand you have already asked Minister Rattenbury about that.

MS LEE: Yes; I have. I am asking you. You had heard about that one?

Ms Davidson: I had heard about it.

MS LEE: After you asked Mr Davis to approach Mr Rattenbury on Monday, 6 November, did you discuss the matter with any other cabinet or Greens colleagues?

Ms Davidson: No; I did not. I think it is very important to have an awareness that, when you are talking about an issue as serious as this, where there may well be young people who have experienced something quite traumatic, it is not appropriate to go and talk to lots of different people about their experience without their consent or authority. It is appropriate to make referrals to people who can take the right action, and I was mindful of ensuring that we did that.

MS LEE: You stand by that the appropriate and the best person to take these concerns to was a staff member, despite the fact that the conduct we are talking about is that of an elected member in this place? That is the best course of action, is it?

Ms Davidson: There was not enough information in the rumours to be able to make any other referrals at that point.

MS LEE: But why not the leader? You are talking about a fellow MLA. I still do not understand why you would not go to your party leader, a fellow MLA, about another MLA.

Ms Davidson: The process that we followed was to ensure that the staff member who had heard the information was able to provide it to the most senior manager in the

organisation who could ensure that correct processes were followed.

MS LEE: Yes, but the chief of staff is not the manager of Mr Davis. Am I wrong?

Ms Davidson: Sorry?

MS LEE: Is the chief of staff Mr Davis's manager?

Ms Davidson: As you well know, MLAs are elected by the people. Particularly if you are not a member of the executive, you are responsible to the people who have elected you.

MS LEE: Then why did you not go public and tell the people? That does not even make sense.

Ms Davidson: I think we have just talked about why it is very important, when you are hearing information about someone who has experienced something traumatic, that you do not go and tell everyone about someone else's potentially traumatic experience without their consent or authority, and I did not know who the people were that we were talking about.

MS LEE: I am trying to get from you your train of thought. You keep saying that you needed to take it to the manager. I am asking you: is the chief of staff in the Greens the manager of the Greens MLAs? Is that what you are saying?

Ms Davidson: No. What I am saying is that senior managers in organisations would be expected to have an understanding of the correct processes to follow when a misconduct issue arises in the workplace.

CHAIR: Did you find it most appropriate to contact the most senior staff member instead of going to Mr Rattenbury, the leader of the Greens? Was that the most appropriate action?

Ms Davidson: My role at that point in time on that weekend, when I became aware that a staff member had heard this information, was to support the staff member in providing that information to the most senior manager in the organisation. That was my role, and I wanted to ensure that the staff member was supported, having had the courage to come forward and say that they had heard this information.

CHAIR: Did you seek any advice in terms of who you should raise this matter with?

Ms Davidson: We went straight to the most senior manager in the organisation. As I was saying earlier, in most organisations senior managers would have an understanding of the correct HR processes to follow if there was a misconduct issue in the workplace.

MS LEE: You have just said that you went to the senior manager because they would have an understanding of how to deal with misconduct in the workplace. On that, are you saying that the allegations, or the rumours, as you call them, that were brought to you about Mr Davis's apparent inappropriate engagement with young people

happened in the workplace?

Ms Davidson: No. I am saying that this was a matter that was brought to me by a member of staff about information that they had heard about another person who worked in the organisation—as in Mr Davis—and we then took it to the most senior manager in the organisation to ensure that the correct processes were followed.

CHAIR: Mr Pettersson, a supplementary?

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you. It is just a quick one. Seemingly, these lines of questioning all come back to the report to the leader of the ACT Greens. Did you keep any notes or records throughout this process?

Ms Davidson: No; I did not, but I did take a question on notice earlier from Ms Lee about the date I had contact with Mr Davis during that period of time. I have checked my phone. I texted him on Friday, 3 November to ask if he was going to a community event that is held once a year and that he would normally attend, and that I have previously attended with him—to ask him if he was planning on going again this year and if he would like me to go with him. That was my contact with him.

MS LEE: So he contacted you?

Ms Davidson: No. I contacted him and asked if he was going to the community event. That was my contact with him during that weekend.

MS LEE: That was the full extent of your text exchange?

Ms Davidson: That is what I have on my phone.

CHAIR: We will move on to the next substantive. This is a little change of pace from what we have been talking about. We will move on to the Food Security Program. Page 188 of the annual report notes that Volunteering ACT received a three-year grant, from 30 June 2025, worth \$78,000 for the Food Security Program. What exactly is this program expected to achieve, and is it connected in any way to the food relief database?

Ms Davidson: Before I hand to Catherine Rule, who can speak in more detail about that program and the database, I will say that one of the reasons why we have needed to increase the level of funding available for food relief is in response to ongoing rising inflation and cost-of-living pressures for Canberrans. We are seeing some really unprecedented situations for people in being able to put food on the table. With housing costs where they are as well, it actually leaves less money available for people on a week-to-week basis to literally put food on the table.

The way in which that is managed in the ACT is through partnerships between community organisations who do a lot of the actual delivery of food relief to people. One of the key things is making sure that we have a strong network, where they can share information with each other about emerging issues or trends or ways of resolving some of these issues. That is why we have this program here. I will pass to Catherine Rule who can talk in more detail about our food relief.

Ms Rule: I am actually going to pass straight to Ms Perkins on this one.

Ms Perkins: Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Catherine. In addition to the network that the minister has just referred to, the work that Volunteering ACT is undertaking includes the development of a food relief database. That is being developed to provide and enable evidence-informed decision-making for food relief in the ACT and provide the opportunity to have robust data collection. Volunteering ACT has been working with the pantries to bring them into that network and to support them in providing that information into the database.

Volunteering ACT has also been developing a communications strategy to provide further information to the community about food relief and food pantries, and an important part of that is to destigmatise people accessing food pantries. It is a very collaborative effort with Volunteering ACT, community groups and pantries across the ACT, and we are looking forward to having further evidence to understand what that demand is looking like, with robust data to support that.

In addition to that work with Volunteering ACT is the further funding that was provided in this year's budget for food relief activities. There was an additional \$230,000 made available for the Food Assistance Program, and that was in response to the really significant demand on our food pantries that we are experiencing from the cost-of-living pressures. There is an existing annual allocation that is provided to support food relief freight funding. Annually, that is around \$62,500. That is to bring food on freight from Foodbank in Sydney down to the ACT. In addition to that ongoing funding, there was an additional \$117,500 provided to Foodbank to support the increased freight to the food pantries, as well as an additional \$112,000 that has gone to OzHarvest to support their food rescue activities, again in response to the increased demand that both of those organisations have seen in supporting Canberrans.

THE CHAIR: Out of that \$180,000 that it comes to—the \$112,000 and the \$62,000—how much has been spent so far on freight costs for food relief?

Ms Perkins: I would have to take that on notice, but we essentially have a contract in place with Foodbank. For this year, it is around \$180,000 in total—that is the \$62,497 that is the annual funding plus \$117,500 this year. It is an annual grant that we provide to them. It is not that they issue us a different invoice as we go throughout the year.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned earlier the food relief database. As I understand it, at last estimates it was indicated that \$475,000 has been allocated to that over four years. Ms Kikkert asked some questions in relation to that database, and the response was that it was still in the early stages. I am wondering: where is that up to, and when will the government be providing some information?

Ms Perkins: The work is still in development. It is being managed by our community partners, Volunteering ACT. In terms of specifics, we can take that on notice and seek further information from Volunteering ACT.

Ms Davidson: I should note too that the \$475,000 that was allocated was not just

about the database; it was also about supporting that network of providers and the communications work that needs to go with that.

THE CHAIR: At any point in the previous year, was the government made aware that the money allocated for the freight grant was not enough and that more money needed to be injected into it?

Ms Davidson: Yes. We did receive some feedback from the sector, not so much about the funding but about some concerns around making sure that they could have ongoing access to delivery of supplies. We assured them that we would be making sure that they could continue to receive supplies, and we took the actions necessary to ensure that that happened.

THE CHAIR: What was the process, and how long did it take?

Ms Davidson: To ensure that we continued to receive supplies?

THE CHAIR: And to provide the funding—yes.

Ms Davidson: Let's see. The conversations happened over a relatively short period of time and were around getting a better understanding of who needed access to this service, what kind of use they were making of the service, and what were the options for how we could best ensure that it continued to be delivered. It takes a number of conversations back and forth to be able to work out those details. We have some very committed community food pantry service providers in Canberra who were able to give us some good feedback about what their needs were, and that was very much appreciated.

THE CHAIR: Were any of these services impacted by delivery of food and funding for delivery of this food relief?

Ms Davidson: I understand that it was a stressful period for them, but it was absolutely our aim the whole way through to ensure that the delivery of supplies continued. The work that they do is critically important and could not really be done by anywhere else if we did not have those community food pantries that were working on those issues.

One of the other really important things that our community food pantries do is often work with families that are experiencing multiple difficulties at the same time. Someone might come to them first and foremost because they need access to food—they are trying to put food on the table—but, in the course of conversations, you might find that the family actually needs some other support as well or that the household needs some access to some other supports as well. With those community food pantries being able to network with each other and share information about what other services people might need and any emerging trends that they are seeing is a really helpful way of keeping our community connected and building the kind of social resilience that we need to deal with future disasters, whether they are natural disasters, pandemics, economic downturns, or whatever it might be.

MS CLAY: Minister, the government has announced its new circular economy

legislation and strategy, and part of that will involve asking businesses to recover more of their food waste. I understand government will be consulting with high-food-waste-generating businesses to develop what that program might look like. Do you think CSD might be involved in those discussions? And do you imagine there will be an attempt to bring together the food rescue organisations into that consultation, so that we can perhaps meet a few needs at once?

Ms Davidson: That is a really good point. One of the difficulties that a lot of governments face is siloing of work, when you could actually get better outcomes by connecting people. It has always been my view that Canberra, being the kind of interconnected, big country town that it is, should be able to set a good example in reducing some of that siloing and having directorates working on issues together. I might pass to Catherine Rule, who could talk a little bit about how we might be able to do that if we were able to work with the directorate that is doing that circular economy work.

Ms Rule: Certainly through a couple mechanisms of government, I would ordinarily expect that this would come up—to provide opportunities for us to work together. For example, the processes that are involved in the development of cabinet submissions mean that everybody who has an interest in those cabinet submissions would get to see and comment on those submissions as they are development and to advise or brief ministers prior to a discussion in either a cabinet subcommittee or the cabinet room itself. There are also a number of mechanisms that support the deliberations of cabinet. For example, the human services subcommittee, which I chair, includes directors-general across all the human services streams. We often have discussions on issues like this to identify where portfolios overlap and where opportunities might exist for us to work together. I cannot tell you off the top of my head whether this one is actually on the forward agenda for that subcommittee, but I am really happy to have a look at it. As the minister said, I think that is a great suggestion.

MR PETTERSSON: I was hoping the committee could get an update on the implementation of the Carers Recognition Act.

Ms Davidson: Yes; absolutely. I might pass to Catherine Rule, who can provide an update on how that piece of work is going. But, in addition to the work on recognition, we have also been progressing work to help with some of the day-to-day difficulties that carers are facing and will continue to do so. The work that Carers ACT have been doing in implementing the Carers Strategy, for example, in making sure that the governance of that is quite thorough, has been a big part of why that has been achieving some success. But there is a lot more work that we would like to do. Catherine Rule can talk a bit more about the implementation of the recognition act.

Ms Rule: A whole range of things are happening in relation to carers. At the centre of it is the development of the Carers Strategy. We are working with a range of organisations, including Carers ACT, on activities under that strategy to ensure that we can implement the act, but it is not just about the act; it is also about the recognition of carers more broadly. We estimate there are about 50,000 unpaid carers across the ACT who carry a pretty heavy burden in caring for members of our community on an unpaid basis. Working with the requirements of the act, Carers ACT and other members of the sector, the funding under the Carers Strategy is really

important to make sure that we can support those critical members of our community. Jacinta Evans might be able to comment on the implementation of the act itself.

Ms Evans: I acknowledge the privilege statement. As the director-general and the minister have referred to, we are working closely with Carers ACT to progress the Carers Strategy. The act itself is intended to assist us to deliver the activities around recognition of local carers. We are also working with Carers ACT around a respite options handbook and on the broader governance around the strategy.

The funding that was provided by the government, which was \$825,000 over four years, was to ensure that Carers ACT were adequately resourced to progress with the strategy. In terms of how they are going with implementing that, they have been progressing their local carer recognition activities and the governance activities in 2023-24. They then move on into 2024-25 and 2025-26 with a continuation of those activities, which will be delivered as part of the act.

Ms Davidson: The respite handbook that Jacinta Evans just referred to was published and launched recently, during ACT Carers Week. It is a really useful resource for local carers who are in need of respite. Certainly, that has been one of the top issues that carers have talked about—the pressures on their time and wellbeing, particularly over the last few years when, as a community, unpaid carers have ended up picking up a lot of work that otherwise would have been done by other service providers during COVID regulations. There is also the economic impact.

As we are going into another wave of the COVID pandemic, it is critically important that organisations who are working with carers, or have carers as their members or clients, have a good understanding of the pressures that unpaid carers will be facing that are different from, say, those of the broader community.

There will be people out there who will need to stay physically isolated at times or who have greater impacts on their time and responsibilities because of COVID than maybe the rest of us have to deal with. A little bit of kindness, compassion and understanding can go a long way, as can some flexibility around working, studying at home and still being able to meet with people or engage in community activities online. Just because we can get together in a big room does not necessarily mean we always should do it in a big room. Sometimes you can be more inclusive by still offering those online options.

THE CHAIR: While we are on the Carers Strategy, I understand that it was launched in 2018. The first three-year action plan report was done in December 2021. The question is: will there be any further action plans? If not, how will the implementation of the strategy be measured and tracked?

Ms Davidson: The ACT Carers Strategy runs until 2028. I expect that a decision about a future carers strategy, what kind of consultation might be needed and how that would work will be made closer to 2028. We still have a lot of work that we need to deliver on the current strategy. I am very focused on making sure that we continue to support carers in the community by doing that work.

A couple of the key things that carers have talked about, particularly recently, are the

need for more respite options, particularly for mental health respite, mental health chronic conditions and psychosocial disability, as well as some way of easily letting people know about their role as a carer and what sort of things they might need to know about that. There is the concept of something like a carer's passport or a card that you can show that lets people know that you are a carer. That means there are certain things that you will have to deal with that you might not otherwise have thought to ask about. It is about making sure that we can continue to provide that support and build on the range of things that can help carers in their day-to-day life. That will continue to happen.

THE CHAIR: The annual report states that the government recently provided an additional \$825,000 over four years to further support the ACT Carers Strategy. Can you outline how this funding will be used?

Ms Davidson: Yes. I might pass back to Jacinta Evans, who can talk in more detail about the funding breakdown.

Ms Evans: As I mentioned recently, the \$825,000 has been provided to Carers ACT to facilitate activity under the Carers Strategy. That involves a range of activities. They are certainly looking to progress under the five themes that are mentioned in the strategy—services and supports, recognition and awareness, young carers, inclusion, and workforce and skills recognition.

That funding will go towards some very specific activities, such as one that the minister mentioned recently, around the handbook. There are other things, such as Carers ACT being able to promote more broadly opportunities for carers and provide activities for carers. It is also about contributing to future governance around a strategy or action plan.

Chair, you asked earlier about the Carers Recognition Act. I realised that I had skipped over speaking about the government's response. I want to go to that because the Carers Recognition Act commenced in June 2022. The intent is that ACT government directorates will demonstrate how they are upholding the recognition act. I have a few examples that I thought might be of interest.

For instance, Canberra Health Services are raising awareness and promoting carer relationships to ensure that carers are engaged and supported during the treatment of a person for whom they usually provide care. That is a really important awareness-raising matter regarding the person being cared for. It may not be the husband or wife that provides the care. CHS are raising awareness about providing that support for the person doing the caring. They are also consulting with carers, including Carers ACT, during the review and development of the policy documents. This is the evidence they are giving around how they are supporting the act.

Within the Community Services Directorate, we are providing support services for our employees to ensure that there are family-friendly and flexible workplaces specifically for carers. We are making sure that people are able to attend and be recognised at community awareness and recognition events, such as National Carers Week.

In the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, the Lifetime Care and Support Scheme provides reasonable and necessary ongoing treatment and care for people who have been injured. The scheme recognises that it is important to provide support to carers as well as participants during recovery, rehabilitation and beyond. Carers are therefore recognised as nominated representatives.

Each government directorate or agency is now required to report annually against how they are upholding the Carers Recognition Act.

THE CHAIR: Minister, did you say that a second action plan report will be done?

Ms Davidson: The current action plan is still running at the moment. The strategy itself runs through to 2028. There would need to be additional work done there. At the moment we are still in the process of delivering what is in the current action plan.

THE CHAIR: It was reported on back in December 2021; is that correct?

Ms Davidson: The first action plan?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Davidson: I could not tell you off the top of my head on what date it was reported.

MS CLAY: Minister, I was interested in that figure—that we have 50,000 unpaid carers. That includes parents, I assume. What are the different types of carers that we have in that 50,000 figure?

Ms Davidson: Within the 50,000 unpaid carers in the Canberra community, we are talking about people who provide care for someone with disability, and for someone who is elderly and requires additional care and support. We are also talking about out-of-home carers of children. We are not talking about parents more generally.

MS CLAY: COVID has had a huge impact on unpaid carers, in particular. What are we doing now that we were not doing before? Are we giving unpaid carers the help they need, in light of COVID, given that the uptick is happening again?

Ms Davidson: There are a couple of different aspects to the kinds of support that carers need in those situations. One is around reducing the transmission risk and the public health impact of COVID for people who are particularly at risk if they catch it. That is around making sure that people still have access to PPE, and that support services for elderly people or people with disability can continue.

Our healthcare workforce and every other workforce in this city are also impacted by people having to go into COVID quarantine or having to stay at home because they are sick. When you are working with people who are particularly at risk, it is even more important that you do not go to work when you have symptoms or when you have tested positive. That will continue to have impacts on that workforce.

Unpaid carers are often the people who end up having to cover gaps. If your support worker would normally come to your house and they cannot come that day because

they have just tested positive, you might not be able to get another support worker to come and help, in time for the unpaid carer to be able to go to work or go and do the other normal things that they would normally do in the community. That has flow-on impacts for those carers.

That kindness and compassion, and a bit of flexibility from all of us in the community, towards carers who are having to deal with that, can make a huge difference to their day-to-day life.

MS CLAY: Is there a role for greater commonwealth funding in those situations?

Ms Davidson: When we are talking about things like workforce impacts, sometimes it is not necessarily about having more money. If there are not enough workers out there and we do not have the capacity to pick up extra shifts or things like that, more funding will not necessarily solve that problem.

Every industry at the moment is feeling those kinds of workforce pressures. But when we are talking about disability and aged care, it is particularly acute. Quite often these are people who are not paid a huge amount for the level of responsibility that they have. They are also people who are hugely committed to the care work that they do. It is a real vocation for people who go into care work. They want to make sure that they are doing the right thing and protecting the health and wellbeing of the people for whom they are responsible by not turning up to work when they are feeling sick.

Generally speaking, this is something that is happening across every sector of the workforce. It is just that when we are talking about at-risk people, unpaid carers often end up having to cover gaps that otherwise there is no way of dealing with. It is not a fair thing to do. The more that the rest of us can do to give them the flexibility to be where they need to be, to protect people's lives, is really important.

THE CHAIR: I have a question on the volunteering strategy. During the previous estimates, the minister, in responding to a question on notice, said that the Community Services Directorate was working within existing resources to develop a new five-year ACT volunteering strategy and associated action plan. When can we expect to see this new strategy and action plan?

Ms Davidson: A listening report has been released by Volunteering ACT. That was released in May 2023. It gives us a good understanding of the pressures that that sector has been dealing with. It has really shifted over the last few years as a result of not only the disruptions and the economic uncertainty but also the ongoing climate crisis. Every single time that we have things like bushfires, a smoke apocalypse or major storms, it is volunteers who end up going out there and doing a lot of the recovery work that is involved, and looking out for people in our community.

The other difficulty that we are having is in some way connected to what I was saying earlier about the impacts on the care workforce, for disability and aged care. I refer also to early childhood educators. I was talking to someone at an organisation earlier today who provide counselling services for mental health. One of the things that they provide as part of that service is child care for parents who are accessing those programs while they are in the program. They have been having a lot of difficulty

finding volunteer childcare workers and early childhood educators.

With that particular part of the workforce, all of those care professions are under so much pressure. We have so much more work to do than there are people available to do it. Part of those pressures is that it is not an incredibly well-paid area of our economy. There is a real undervaluing of the work that care workers provide, whether it is disability, aged care or early childhood education.

Going back to the volunteering strategy, I can pass to Anita Perkins, who will talk more about the time line for getting a strategy up. It also needs to work in well with the National Strategy for Volunteering at the same time.

Ms Perkins: We have commenced work with Volunteering ACT to work together to co-design the ACT strategy. With respect to work that we have undertaken to date, we have done some scoping of the size of the volunteer workforce, and identifying the types of volunteering initiatives that are operating across the ACT. I am sure it is not surprising that there is a huge volume of volunteers operating across programs and services that the ACT government delivers across education, health, emergency services and events like the National Multicultural Festival, Floriade and Enlighten.

We are also in the process of looking at a high-level jurisdictional scan of volunteering strategies in other states, particularly in response to the national strategy that was released earlier this year. The time line that we are working to is that we will provide to the minister for consideration, in early 2024, a strategy, with a view that we would have it in shape to be released around National Volunteer Week, which is in late May next year.

Ms Davidson: We have around 65,000 volunteers working with ACT government across a huge range of areas, including the upcoming National Multicultural Festival. That is always a favourite for people who are volunteering.

THE CHAIR: Will this strategy include community consultation? If so, has it occurred or when will it occur?

Ms Perkins: There has been extensive sector consultation and with volunteering organisations. That informed the listening report that was released earlier this year. We have further work to do to scope what is still required with the co-design of the strategy. That listening report, which is available on the Volunteering ACT website, provides a fairly comprehensive snapshot of the impacts of COVID and what that has done to the volunteering landscape over the last couple of years.

Ms Davidson: On that consultation that Volunteering ACT undertook with their sector, I want to thank them for the work that they have done. It has been quite extensive, in order to better understand the diversity of organisations out there that are working with volunteers and what their different needs are. Around 100 of their member organisations and volunteering peak bodies participated in that consultation process and gave their contribution. There is some really deep thinking there about what the sector needs and how we can better support them.

Whenever we are talking about how we get better as a community at dealing with

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unexpected things that come up, we want something that is community led and government supported. Volunteering ACT have done a great job with that listening report in leading the community and telling us what they need.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank the minister and all officials for your attendance today. I would like to thank the broadcasting team and Hansard for their support. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected *Hansard*. If any members wish to put any questions on notice, please upload them to the parliamentary portal as soon as possible, and no later than five business days after this hearing. This meeting is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 4.25 pm.