



**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 PETTERSSON (Deputy Chair)**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

WEDNESDAY, 15 NOVEMBER 2023

**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.....24, 50, 59

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Amended 20 May 2013

Appearances:

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

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 Branch, Housing Assistance

Naughton, Mr Ben, Executive Branch Manager, Infrastructure and Contracts, Housing Assistance

McIntyre, Ms Min, Acting Executive Branch Manager, Housing and Homelessness Programs

THE CHAIR: Good morning, and welcome to this public hearing of the Health and Community Wellbeing Committee for its inquiry into the annual reports for 2022-2023. The committee will today examine annual reports of the Community Services Directorate and the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of 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 could use the words: "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

I welcome Ms Yvette Berry, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development; and Minister Vassarotti, Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services; and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw attention to that privilege statement. A witness must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Please confirm that you understand the implications of the statement and that you agree to comply with it. Are we calling for a consensus across the room?

Ms Berry: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Everyone is nodding. We will take that. The committee received an

opening statement this morning from Minister Vassarotti which has been accepted as a submission. The committee will accept any other opening statements as submissions. Otherwise, we will get straight into questions.

Ms Berry: Chair, I have a statement to provide for the committee. I was hoping to read it out loud. It was supposed to be an update for the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program for Friday. Unfortunately, Friday's events overtook everything, so I wanted to get the chance to make sure that this was publicly available and known to the community by providing this update. We have updated and provided advice to the public housing tenants, both in calls and in writing, so I was just wondering if the committee would agree to me reading this out.

THE CHAIR: We did suggest that Minister Vassarotti put in a submission. Is this the statement that you are referring to?

Ms Berry: Yes.

Ms Vassarotti: I would be very happy for Minister Berry to make this statement. I do not have any problems with it.

THE CHAIR: Given that it is only half a page, it will not take up too much time, to be honest, so yes.

Ms Berry: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, committee. Ensuring Canberrans experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage have a safe and comfortable place to call home will always be a priority for the ACT government. That is why the government has decided to make tenant relocations for the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program voluntary.

Mandatory relocations under the program were paused in August while the government worked through recommendations made by the ACT Ombudsman on 31 July. Housing ACT has been in touch with impacted tenants to let them know that they are no longer required to move under the program. While relocations as part of the program will be voluntary only, mandatory relocations will continue in other circumstances, including when a property is no longer safe to live in.

The work that Housing ACT has done with tenants and the community services sector to rethink how decisions about relocations are made and communicated is so important. The redesigned process focuses on sharing information and considering individual tenants' circumstances, which addresses the concerns set out in the ACT Ombudsman's report.

The decision to make tenant relocations voluntary will not stand in the way of delivering on public housing targets. More than 580 homes have already been built or bought and another 600 are in the construction pipeline. The government is now well placed to deliver the program's target of 1,400 new or redeveloped homes by 2027. Instead of selling properties and redeveloping sites to enable the highest number of new public housing homes to be built in the ACT, Housing ACT will now only sell properties that become vacant.

The bottom line is that people will always come first, with the needs of current tenants being balanced with those of Canberrans on the waitlist for public housing. With that, Chair, officials and Minister Vassarotti are ready to take your questions. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will pass my first substantive across to Mr Parton.

MR PARTON: Thank you, Chair. With regard to the update that you have just given, Minister, as you have stated, the mandatory relocation program has now been revised to a voluntary program after a lot of complaints and recommendations from various parts of the community. There were also recommendations from the Canberra Liberals and recommendations, first and foremost, from the ACT Ombudsman which lined up with many of the community concerns. Given all that, what do you say to the 493 tenants who were already forced out of their homes? What is your message to them?

Ms Berry: First, to respond to your question, Mr Parton, there was no disagreement with the program itself. The disagreement that the ombudsman particularly raised was how the program was implemented, or the order, I guess, in which the program was implemented. I think that is important to acknowledge. Second, there is how much work went into working with public housing tenants to make sure that, when they did move, the homes were homes that they could live in and supported their needs now and into the future—much better homes, much better quality, much more sustainable.

With regard to tenants who had been distressed as a result of the mandatory relocations, I have apologised. I apologise again on behalf of the government and on behalf of Housing ACT for the distress that it caused them.

MR PARTON: Is it embarrassing, as a minister of the government, to have to backflip in this way?

Ms Berry: No; not at all. I am just taking responsibility for the work that we did. I am taking responsibility for the actions that the government, I as the minister, and the directorate took, acknowledging that it did not work for everybody and that people were distressed as a result of that, and have apologised. It is appropriate.

MR PARTON: Is it embarrassing, though, that it took 18 months to pause the forced relocations and reconsider the approach? People looking from the outside are thinking that, ultimately, if the ombudsman had not made the recommendations, the government probably would have just left it in place and continued.

Ms Berry: Not necessarily, with regard to responding to the ombudsman. I would say that Housing ACT have been reviewing this program from the get-go. Work had been continuing to occur on how the program could be implemented better. Adjustments were being made to make sure that tenants were supported as much as we possibly could. The ombudsman's report gave us the chance to look even harder and regroup with our community stakeholders to ensure that we were getting it right. That is the main thing for us: making sure we got it right, that we put our tenants first, and that we could build homes that met their needs and the needs of future tenants, as well as growing our program to address the needs on the waiting list.

MR PARTON: Chair, I will close on this line. Those who received exemptions went through many battles to seek those exemptions. Most were approved, but 15 were not. How many of those 15 tenants that were not approved have already relocated?

Ms Berry: I do not know if we have that level of detail. We might have to see what we have available without identifying any individuals.

MR PARTON: Of course.

Ms Berry: Let me see what we can find for you. I will take that on notice.

MR PARTON: That is all I have.

THE CHAIR: Mr Pettersson, a substantive.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, more than \$63 million worth of repairs and maintenance was carried out on public housing properties in the last financial year. During my time as an MLA, I have heard from a number of constituents that they have had challenges getting repairs and maintenance requests carried out in a timely manner at their properties. Can you help me understand what the government is doing to improve that situation?

Ms Berry: Yes. Obviously, it is not a welcome experience for tenants who have no choice but to get other people to repair their homes, because they are not their own homes. Housing ACT requires that repairs are made through our maintenance program. Sometimes, there is range of reasons why repairs and maintenance do not go to plan or do not go ahead in a timely manner. Some of those include that we cannot get in touch with the tenant. The tradesperson might not be able to get in touch with the tenant. Sometimes the tenant is not home when the contractor knocks on the door to complete the work. The nature of the job sometimes turns out to be much more complex than originally logged, for example, by the tenant, or there might be other jobs identified. And sometimes the job is not properly categorised when the tenant makes the complaint or raises the issue with Programmed. It can be for a range of reasons that the work does not go ahead in a timely manner or in a way that the tenant would expect. It is my expectation that the work would occur in a timely manner and that it is of a quality that we would all expect in our community and in our Housing ACT homes.

As part of the government's contract with Total Facilities Management, there are financial penalties if they do not achieve their KPIs, which are set by the government. That is making sure that 95 per cent of the programs that are delivered are delivered in an appropriate time frame. That work is available and publicly notifiable on the procurement website.

The KPIs that are listed as part of the contract are in categories. There is an urgent category, which means that the work has to be carried out within four hours. Priority work is carried out by the next day. There is priority work carried out within the next five calendar days. Then there is "normal", which is work carried out within 20 calendar days. I might ask Mr Naughton if he has some more detail on what that

kind of work might involve.

Mr Naughton: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question. My team oversees the Total Facilities contract with Programmed. Last financial year, 26,690 responsive works were carried out at the request of tenants following a call, an email or a text message sent to the Programmed contact centre. Those 26,690 responsive works allow the contact centre to, with the tenant, assess the urgency of the case and then respond accordingly. As the minister has outlined, those responsive works occur against key performance indicators that we have in the contract with Programmed, and we monitor those key performance indicators in quarterly meetings that we have with Programmed on the contract. We meet with Programmed very regularly. The team engages with them every day.

As well as those nearly 27,000 responsive works, we had approximately 50,000 planned works throughout the reporting period as well. As you have identified, the value of works that were carried out is significant. Our portfolio of homes is significant as well. Administering the contract to meet the needs of the tenants is a core capability within Housing ACT, and we take that role very seriously.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. Thank you.

MS CLAY: Minister, we heard at estimates recently—and it came from the community legal sector and the legal aid sector—that there is a lot of effort going into ACAT on appeals for people who are trying to get their contracts fulfilled for repairs and trying to deal with contract management issues there. The request came through estimates for more funding for legal services, but it struck me that it might be better to just get the repairs made.

The New South Wales government has just announced that they will be insourcing their public housing repairs, and that will remove that whole barrier. If somebody then has a problem with a repair not being done properly, or not being done in a timely manner, or the contractor simply has not shown up, they will not have that issue. They can go straight to government, make the complaint and get the work done. As these contracts come up for renewal, is government going to consider insourcing these instead of outsourcing the responsibility to a contractor?

Ms Berry: Yes.

MS CLAY: Great!

Ms Berry: Yes, it has actually been an election commitment for the Labor Party to insource as much as we possibly can in government. Certainly ACT Labor, and the government, are considering what it would look like to insource these kinds of contracts. This is the biggest contract in the ACT government, so unpicking what it does right now to get to a place where we could consider insourcing will take some time and some investigation. But it is certainly something that the government is keen to investigate further.

Obviously, we have to continue through contract periods, and that will be the case in the meantime, and make sure that the current contractor does what it is required to do,

which is repair homes in a timely manner and provide those maintenance repairs when they are required and when they are requested. I have certainly had initial conversations with the CFMEU about what that might look like, but it will be quite a considerable amount of work.

MS CLAY: Are contracts still being renewed? Are contractor contracts still being renewed at the moment?

Ms Berry: It is one big contract that is managed by Programmed, and that contract has at least another 12 months with options for extensions.

MS CLAY: So the first available opportunity would be in about 12 months?

Ms Berry: Yes.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

MR PARTON: Minister, are you able to give me more information on the status of the external review of total facilities management? It is just not clear. Is anyone able to give me more information in terms of what the outcomes of that review were?

Ms Berry: Yes, Mr Naughton might be able to provide you with some information.

Mr Naughton: Thank you for your question, Mr Parton. Just to clarify, administering any contract requires ongoing contract administration. We undertook a package of work to understand what key performance indicators and measures that are reported against the performance of the contractor are best to measure their performance and best to measure the way that we manage the contract.

We undertook a review of the way that we measure the performance of Programmed and the way they report against those key performance indicators. That report was tabled at one of our quarterly meetings with Programmed and we are currently working through, with the contractor, what adjustments would be made to the key performance indicators. As an indication, we have got about 25 performance measures and a second set of another 25 performance measures around social and deliverable outcomes. We are looking to consolidate those to a smaller set and a set that is far easier to measure.

Just to clarify: that relates to the performance of the contractor and the way they report, and we assess their performance. As the minister articulated earlier, there are ways that we also impose consequences for the contractor should they not meet those deliverable targets.

MR PARTON: That being the case, and that being the process around that review, I am assuming that it will continue to be purely an internal document—that it is not going to be any more openly available. I am assuming that if I ever call for it to be tabled it will not be.

Mr Naughton: It is a relationship with a contractor, so therefore bound under those circumstances, yes.

MR PARTON: Minister, I sense that your language today on this matter has changed in the time that we have been speaking on it. Without wanting to put words in your mouth, there is a certain level of frustration that has led you to a point where it is well and truly within the realm of possibility that things may change—not announcing that they will. Can I ask you to comment on that or not?

Ms Berry: I probably cannot make announcements—

MR PARTON: I understand.

Ms Berry: But there are a few things that are public. It is definitely Labor policy and in the PAGA to insource; that is public. We are continually reviewing these kinds of arrangements, particularly with Programmed and the work that they do, to see how it could be improved—that is, probably, public.

MR PARTON: Yes.

Ms Berry: That is continuous work. I guess we are at a time now in the contract phase when these are things that we can seriously start looking at. How can the contract be improved? Or is it an opportunity to consider other means of providing that maintenance work?

I know it is something that Mr Pettersson has been particularly interested in and has raised with me on a number of occasions. And I know the CFMEU have, in fact, stated publicly that that would be their preference. There are things that are out and on the public record that I can share and remind everybody of.

MR PARTON: Thank you.

MS CLAY: Minister, can you give us an update on the commissioning process for our homelessness services?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Ms Clay, for the question. It has been a really positive experience working through a commissioning process with the specialist homelessness services. We recognise that this subsector is one of the first subsectors that is doing a commissioning process, which is quite a different way of procuring to how we previously procured. It does require a high level of trust and engagement with our community partners. I want to put on the table at the beginning real thanks to our community partners who have been really engaged with this process.

We came into this process really committed to doing a co-design process in terms of us working together with the sector to identify how the system was working currently: what was working well; what could be improved; where our gaps in service provision were; and where our emerging needs are, because we recognise our community is really shifting. Minister Berry and I commenced a process of working with the sector in terms of that co-design process.

That took us to a point where we were able to develop an investment strategy, and we have been working on the commissioning cycle that looks at discovering, strategising,

designing, investing, delivering and integrating. We are up to the investment and delivery phases of the commissioning cycle. As part of this, and one of the really positive things because of the process we are going through, we are able to provide greater funding certainty by entering into longer term contractual arrangements with organisations. There will be some differences in the lengths of contracts, but we are also looking at the ability to extend across a 10-year period, where possible, with appropriate built-in review processes so we can make sure we are not just going through the process every couple of years.

In terms of where we are at with grants and tenders, we have got an initial term of three years, with an initial option period of three years and then another further option of four years—so that is where the 10 years comes from. We have got a range of different procurement methodologies through commissioning. One is around direct sourcing. That is working with services on a one-on-one basis, particularly on the basis that it might be a service that has a specific, tailored expertise that is not held by other organisations. There might be organisations that are bringing particular resources to the table, such as facilities, which mean that the government has the ability to provide those without it having that level of resource.

We have entered into 13 contracts, with new deeds of agreement completed and in place. We have also gone through a process, for some organisations, of select grants. That is, again, recognising that there are a group of providers within the sector that have specific skills, and they have run in the process with those. Two select grants have been awarded, with two deeds of agreement completed and in place. In terms of open grants, there has been one grant awarded, with a new deed of the grant being negotiated; responses to another grant are currently under assessment. Then we have five open tenders. That is a more traditional procurement process—an open tender. We have five open tenders in total. Three of those have been released, with the remaining to be released in February and March.

As part of the co-design process, we did identify that there were a couple of areas that needed some further work, where we did not think our current models were actually fully meeting the needs of the community. They are programs really dealing with high levels of complexity. All of our services are working with clients that have levels of complexity, but they are particularly complex programs looking at how we manage food services, tenancy and property management, support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and the central intake service. We are still working with community partners in terms of the co-design around that. As part of that, we did a full process across the sector. We have now done some surveying, with 38 responses from 17 organisations about potential options, and we have held two co-design workshops. Following that, we are reflecting and building up the invest approach for those services as well.

MS CLAY: Minister, it is an excellent idea to move to multiyear funding for an ongoing need. I think that is probably the single biggest issue I hear across the board. People do not like having to get year-to-year funding. They cannot plan for their staff, and they cannot deliver their work well in an environment like that, so that actually sounds like a huge improvement with the commissioning service. We often hear when we ask for this from government that it cannot do that because it has to put in individual budget bids year to year. What is it about this area that makes it suitable for

a commissioning process that could result in a ten-year contract?

Ms Vassarotti: Again, we are very conscious that if we have the ability to provide funding certainty for services, they can actually plan and they can ensure they provide certainty for staff. Moving to longer-term contracts is absolutely a really important need. I think there are a couple of issues. We do have a partnership with the commonwealth. The commonwealth provides funding support in this area, so I think there is the ability to enter into those agreements with our commonwealth partner. I will note that Minister Berry is working with the commonwealth in terms of the ongoing agreement in this area, and housing more generally. But also, as a government, we know that we will be providing services in this area for some time, so this enables us with the ability to make a longer-term investment.

The way in which these agreements have been put in place does not mean that we move away from accountability. This is taxpayer money, and we do need to be ensuring that the services are delivering what we need in the community, so we have got those in-built review processes to work with services in relation to ensuring that they are delivering needs in the community, which we know will shift over a period of time as well. We are moving to much more of a partnership model in relation to that.

It takes time; I would recognise that, particularly as this is a subsector that is at the forefront of a commissioning process, and we are looking at commissioning across the human services sector in the ACT. We are learning together. I am sure that we are continuing to review ways in which we might do things differently and review how our experiences can inform human service-delivery commissioning in the future.

One of the things that I would reflect on is that there is a lot of commissioning going on at the moment, so we do, again, recognise the impact on community services spending a lot of time responding to grants and tenders—it is challenging when they are going through this process. This is a period that can be really unsettling for organisations and staff, so we are trying to work through it in a way to move as quickly as possible and to stage it so we are not inundating organisations with lots of different tenders.

We do recognise there are some challenges, particularly when we have got health, justice and other areas working through the commissioning process as well. One organisation might be operating across different levels of subsectors. One of the things we did in this process, particularly for smaller organisations, was to provide some direct grants to assist them to engage in the commissioning process and so that we were not taking people away from doing the important job of actually supporting people who are experiencing homelessness.

MR PARTON: Minister, I am pleased that you have made a concession at the back end of that answer about the stress that has been caused by this process, because certainly the feedback that I have received from just about everybody in the sector is that for them there is no possible way that you could describe this process as positive. It has been described to me as an extremely long process. It has been massively stressful on the sector, and although indeed it is a process which is in theory designed to create certainty, the process itself has created a lot of uncertainty re outcomes that it has taken an extraordinarily long time to address.

Indeed, one of the stakeholders—and I do not think I am outing anyone, because you would know that I communicate with all of them, so I do not think that there is going to be a prime suspect who is watching the hearings—has suggested that if you think that this was a really positive process, then you must be in a parallel universe. How would you respond to those concerns from the people in this sector who have really struggled with this process?

Ms Vassarotti: What I would reflect is that going through any kind of procurement or commissioning process is a stressful process. There is a process where we are looking at a system-wide level in terms of providing the right services at the right time in the right manner. That is the reality of it. I have sat on the other side of the table and actually lived that experience. It is something that we need to do. We are using taxpayers' money to support people who are experiencing homelessness to be provided with a service, so I think that this is a necessary thing to go through.

In terms of commissioning, what we are really trying to do is to change the paradigm. I think there are some trade-offs with that. In terms of commissioning, and particularly co-design processes, it means it will take longer, because we are trying to engage with the service system in terms of identifying what is the best service mix and asking services to come and actually co-design that with us. That is quite difficult, particularly because we have, in the past, set up a quasi-competitive process, and in some instances we still will have open tenders, where people are being asked to compete against each other. And so there will be different perspectives.

MR PARTON: If you were running this process again from the start today, would you do some of it differently? Has it been a learning experience where you have said, "Yes, that really was not how we should have done that."

Ms Vassarotti: I think there are always learnings. I would reflect on the fact that we were trying to do this co-design process while we were in the COVID period. That had impacts in terms of the timeframes, in terms of the ability to engage services at a time when they were dealing with a real-life crisis, and there was a whole lot of things going through.

I think that the ongoing impact on services of the pandemic that we have come through has actually created a higher level of stress than we would otherwise have. I know people feel like COVID is over, but I think that that has had real-life impacts in terms of the level of stress of organisations, particularly within the human services sector.

There is a real balance. I have also been on the other side of the table, of just continually providing extensions of contracts and things like that while we took a longer time, and that has a very corrosive impact on organisations and their ability to strategically plan as well.

MR PARTON: Well, can I just ask another question. I am sure it will close unless there is someone else. Should the process have included a mapping of existing services in this space to actually ensure that we have no service gaps? I do not know, because I get the sense that that did not occur.

Ms Vassarotti: I would suggest that it did occur. That was quite a significant process and a shared process. There is actually significant material in terms of the analysis that was done and the work that was done across a whole range of subsectors in terms of the services that were being provided and where some of the gaps were. There is a lot of material that is publicly available that actually really speaks to that. It was something that was done in partnership because there was a recognition by government that we did not have all of the perspectives.

Ms Rule: Mr Parton, the first stage of engagement that we did with stakeholders and providers—we called it “discover”—was exactly about that. I was about working out what services existed and where the service gaps were. And at the heart of it I would say that the sector is, at a principles level, on board. They support commissioning. They understand that it is a better way of working in the long term. We appreciate how generous they have been with their time in engaging with us, because the codesign has been really important.

MR PARTON: So, it is sort of like someone going in for a hip replacement knowing that they need it, but it still hurts like hell.

Ms Rule: Yes; that is right. But I think their investment in codesigning this with us has been really invaluable, and I think in the future it will pay massive dividends for all of us, because we could not have this be a process where government decided—where public servants decided—on a kind of framework and a way of doing things without working with the sector on it.

MR PARTON: All right. Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Parton. Mr Parton has a substantive question.

MR PARTON: I will stay with Minister Vassarotti. I just want to know why the number of complaints for disruptive behaviour continues to rise. They rise quite dramatically. I think there were 231 more, according to this table, up to a number of 800, which is quite significant in a total of 2,500 complaints. Why does the number of complaints for disruptive behaviour continue to rise?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Parton, for the question. I think this is an issue that we have explored a few times in sessions such as this in terms of the complexity around antisocial behaviour and complaints. I will look to officials to provide some additional detail around this, but we have put a lot of effort into our complaints-handling process. Sometimes we would see the fact that we have seen a rise in the number of complaints as not all negative, in terms of people believing that there is a complaints process in place, they are aware of a complaints process, and they are able to reach out to Housing ACT to address that issue. I sometimes think seeing a rise in complaints is not all negative. I think we are seeing, across the community, significant increases in complexity of people’s lives. And that will sometimes see an increase in complaints around antisocial behaviour.

Again, we have talked before about the fact that this is a group of tenants who have a higher level of scrutiny in terms of behaviour. And the expectations around a

landlord's management of behaviours for this group of tenants is quite different to what is happening in the private sector. But I might just look to Ms McIntyre to provide a little bit more detail in terms of whether there are particular trends that we are seeing that have led to that increase over this financial year.

Ms McIntyre: Thank you, Mr Parton. Thank you for your question. In the annual report this year there was an increase in complaints. The total number of complaints we received for disruptive behaviour was 800. Now, this complaint period did happen at a time when we were in COVID or coming out of COVID. There were more people at home during that time and more people working from home. We also, coming out of COVID, have seen complexities with our clients in terms of the cost-of-living crisis and in terms of managing the complexities sometimes associated with their tenancies.

Our complaint process does allow us to reach out to tenants, to go and have a discussion with them and to connect them with supports and services to help them resolve any issues that they might be having with complaints around community harmony and antisocial behaviour. Quite often, as well, the complaints process does give us more insight into possible safety issues that are happening in homes, such as domestic and family violence. And we are able to reach out with some really extensive and specialised support in those circumstances.

MR PARTON: Thank you for that response. Minister, obviously my office deals with your office a lot with these sorts of matters, and I note that your office is extremely responsive when it comes to these matters—certainly for us, and I am assuming for the people in the community as well. But so many of the responses that I get indicate, as Ms McIntyre has just said, that you are working with the tenant.

It would appear that working with the tenant is not working. I certainly was not surprised at all when I saw that the disruptive behaviour complaints have gone up quite significantly, because it certainly lines up with the narrative that I am getting from people in the community. Is what we are doing working?

Ms Vassarotti: I think that it is. I think that it is working in terms of a process where we can connect with tenants. A lot of the work that is done in terms of working with tenants, we recognise, is really unseen. Particularly for people who are impacted by behaviour we are often not able to share a whole lot of information about what is going on, because of privacy concerns. And we really recognise the frustration in relation to that.

We often find that some of the issues that are leading to dispute and antisocial behaviour actually do not have their roots in terms of a housing situation but have their roots in other issues that require access to other services that sit beyond Housing ACT's remit. That is one of the real challenges for Housing ACT. There is a real recognition of the role as a social landlord and there is an absolute role to connect people with appropriate services within the community, which will be the systemic way to respond to some of these issues around antisocial behaviour. So, Housing ACT absolutely has obligations under the Residential Tenancy Act.

MR PARTON: Are you fulfilling those obligations?—because the answer so far seems to me to be that the outcomes are not really reflecting that it is working but it is

not our fault; it is external factors.

Ms Vassarotti: Well, certainly in terms of the remit of Housing ACT in terms of the Residential Tenancy Act there is a really clear understanding of obligations. And there is a really clear process to work through the process, particularly when people are not meeting the requirements of the Residential Tenancy Act. That is, rightly, a process which does take some time. There are significant review points and, again, I might look to officials in terms of talking about those escalation points.

I recognise there is frustration, often, within the community. Again, when there is not clear visibility of a process that has been worked through to take a matter to ACAT, for instance, in terms of a breach within the Residential Tenancy Act. But there is a clear process and escalation process in terms of trying to address an issue on an informal basis and then a stepped-through process in terms of meeting obligations under the Residential Tenancy Act.

MR PARTON: I am happy with that response if the Chair wants to move onto something else. I am just mindful that these hearings are quite short.

THE CHAIR: There are no other supplementary questions on this. Mr Parton, it is your lucky day! Would you like my substantive question?

MR PARTON: Thank you, Chair. I am back with Minister Berry. Minister, for a long time you have been promising that the actual raw number of public housing dwellings would increase, and, in reality, over quite a number of years it did not; it actually fell. Finally, we do see some small movement in the right direction. I do not know which promise to go with here, because we do have the promise of 1,000 extra properties, but we also have a promise, in the statement today, of 1,400 new or redeveloped homes by 2027.

I guess my question is regarding the promise of 1,000 extra properties comprising of 400 and 600. What are the baseline figures that you are using to determine that increase? I am assuming that is an increase in numbers. What are the baseline figures that you are using to determine this increase?

Ms Berry: Just before I ask Mr Naughton to go through to the detail of those, you will have seen, Mr Parton, that there is a significant construction pipeline occurring within housing.

MR PARTON: Yes.

Ms Berry: We have over 350 homes right now in the construction phase, so we are aiming to meet our target. At the start of the program we were impacted by COVID, like everybody else, with the construction supplies and construction workforce issues and the weather. The wet weather really impacted on the program meeting its targets as it was first committed to within the PAGA.

We have provided updates on the range of reasons why there have been delays in delivering on the program. All of the reasons I have described are not made up; they are real problems that have been existing. And it was one of the contributions to the

work that we did around the growth and renewal program, as well, in our decision now to not require mandatory relocations, because at one point during the program the sales that we have made of public housing properties has meant that we have funding going forward to build and construct new homes. I might ask Mr Naughton just to talk through some of the numbers for you to get that baseline number and how we are tracking to meet that.

Mr Naughton: Yes, certainly. Thank you for the question. As you would appreciate, there is a bit to this. As the program has always advised, an initial decrease in the total stock numbers is required before it can rise, as properties must be demolished and sold before new properties can be delivered. As at the annual report figures, we have delivered 533 dwellings since the program commenced. We have had to sell 515 and demolish 210 to make way for our new developments.

The current program is primarily self-funded, unlike the previous Public Housing Renewal Program, so it relies on sourcing 1,000 sites for sale and for redevelopment from the existing portfolio. That is 700 sales and 300 sites to be redeveloped, which is effectively knockdown-rebuild. It means that an initial decrease of the total stock numbers is required before it can rise, as properties must be demolished and sold before new properties can be delivered. Only when the renewal target has been met will the portfolio growth actually be realised.

The program needs to be seen in its entirety. The program is not linear, and stock deliveries will increase in the latter years of the program as the pipeline continues to grow, as the minister outlined in the opening statement. Tenants move, sites are sold, demolishing takes place, design and planning approval gets completed, procurement is completed, construction then occurs, delivery then finishes and we hand the keys across to allocations.

To clarify this matter, the growth question is a matter of timing, rather than assets not existing. The official growing and renewing program baseline portfolio stock number is 11,700. As at June 2023 this number was 11,612. However, this number does not tell you that we have 337 dwellings currently under construction, 88 dwellings in procurement and 90 dwellings awaiting development application approval. Please be mindful that the statement the minister made earlier is in relation to current figures. I have just quoted figures from the annual report and those facts. Thank you for your question.

MR PARTON: Thank you for the detail. I appreciate it. Minister, I have expressed frustration over this, as many others have over a long period of time. Even based on the numbers in this annual report, we are still behind. There actually has not been any growth in numbers, has there? We are actually behind still. There is always a promise that it is going to happen in the next few years. When will it happen? When will you backtrack on the promise that by 2027 this will be done? When are you expecting to backtrack on that?

Ms Berry: I do not think we will need to. The update we have provided, with the information that we have at hand, shows the projects that are under construction currently. It is 337 now. There are homes that have been completed in the meantime. All of the detail and the data that we have available to us now has suggested that we

will meet those time frames of homes that are completed or, at the very least, completing the construction phase.

MR PARTON: All right. This is sort of related. How many dwellings have transitioned from straight government-run public housing into headleases with community housing providers in the reporting period, and additionally in the last five years? I probably should have just put that on notice, really, shouldn't I?

Ms Berry: Yes. We might have to take that on notice.

Ms Rule: We will have to take that one on notice; thank you.

MR PARTON: Yes. I have got a few here that—

Ms Rule: The totals, rather than the transitions during the period?

MR PARTON: Yes. I have a few here like that, so you will hear from me.

Ms Berry: I share the frustration you have, Mr Parton, around the challenges that we have faced, but Housing ACT has worked incredibly hard to overcome some of those challenges to meet the targets and increase Housing ACT stock. We will continue to work towards increasing stock. That has always been my priority. Overcoming these challenges has been difficult. There is no doubt about it. But we have not stopped, have not taken our foot off the pedal.

In addition to the work that we are doing, we have the HAFF, which will provide opportunities for the community housing sector to provide even more affordable homes and rentals in the ACT and across the country. We have the \$50 million accelerator funding and also the housing accelerator fund and the commitments that were made in the ACT government's budget for \$60 million for more affordable rentals.

There is going to be a lot of work and infrastructure and construction happening over the next five years. I know it does not fix the issues that we have immediately in addressing the significant numbers that we have on our waiting list. However, we are doing everything we can. We are leaving no stone unturned. We are looking at every opportunity we possibly can. Now we at least have a partnership with the federal government that provides us with more chances to do that.

MR PARTON: All right. Thank you.

MS CLAY: On this line, Minister, in 2017 and 2018 land that allowed construction of around 400 dwellings was allocated to Housing ACT. Are you able to tell me how many of those dwellings have been constructed on that land since 2017-18?

Ms Berry: We might have some of that detail available. I will hand over to Mr Naughton.

Mr Naughton: Certainly. Thank you very much for the question. The 400 PAGA committed dwellings—

MS CLAY: No, no, no. This is since 2017-18, so that is before the PAGA. I understand that land for the construction of 400 dwellings was allocated in 2017-18 and I am trying to find out how many of those houses have been constructed.

Mr Naughton: I will take that question on notice. We have a number that have been constructed, with keys handed to tenants, and a number that are under construction and are not technically complete yet, so we can provide you with a detailed breakdown of those two subsets.

MS CLAY: That would be great. Thank you. Can you tell me whether Housing ACT paid full market value for that land?

Mr Naughton: We have arrangements with the Suburban Land Agency to pay full market value for land that we acquire as part of the program we have in place.

MS CLAY: Okay, so full market value had to be paid and was paid for all of those sites?

Mr Naughton: That is correct, yes.

MS CLAY: Okay. I have another one that you may want to take on notice. That will be fine, but sometimes it is easier to get the question right in a conversation first. For each site that we have demolished as part of the program, are you able to tell me how many dwellings are replacing each dwelling?

Mr Naughton: Yes, we have that information. Yes.

MS CLAY: Great; thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, the CSD annual report states that 56 per cent of public housing households include someone living with a disability. Can you please tell the committee how the government is meeting the needs of tenants with disability, in terms of household modifications?

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question, Mr Pettersson. There is the renewal program, which is about making sure that we build homes that are accessible for people in place, moving forward. That means they have wider doorways, wider hallways, more space. The kitchen and wet areas, the bathroom and toilet, have more space and can be retrofitted or screens removed so that people who might be using accessibility devices will be able to move freely around their residence. There are lifts and wider parking spaces, all that kind of thing, within our new homes. That has been a requirement. I think 96 per cent of our new builds meet those accessibility requirements.

For existing homes there are a range of different modifications that might be required for individuals. That includes modifications to bathrooms, which might mean handrails and lift rails for people to be able to pull themselves up. In the kitchen shelves can be lowered to suit people who might be in a wheelchair. Doorways can be widened, including into the home and inside the home, to make sure that they are class C accessible. There are slip drains on all the floors and overlays. There is

overland water management to prevent ingress into the dwellings, with drains outside of the dwellings. There are usually sliding doors and flat surfaces so that there are no trip hazards or lumps or bumps that people have to move over, and ramps and things like that as well. There are a significant range of accessibility features that we can use to modify homes to meet people's needs.

Ms Rule: In the last financial year we spent \$1.2 million on home modifications for tenants with a disability. We do that in conjunction with that person's medical care team, so it is not just us deciding that they need a particular widget or whatever. In conjunction with their medical team, we work out what those specific needs are and spend the money on those home modifications, either from our budget or working with other providers like the National Disability Insurance Agency, where that is relevant, to make sure that people's homes are able to meet their specific needs.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. Thank you.

MS CLAY: We are moving into another summer. We are expecting heatwaves, maybe bushfire and smoke risk. I would love to know how we are preparing for rough sleepers and people who are homeless to deal with that situation and also what we are doing for our public housing tenants.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Ms Clay, for the question. It is a really important question. When we have lived through extreme weather events, the impact on people sleeping rough has been at the forefront of the minds of many people in the community.

In the homelessness sector, we now have a range of new services that we were able to stand up, particularly through the COVID period, that provide some additional support to people. One in particular is Ainslie Lodge, which had previously operated in winter, trying to provide support for people to escape from cold weather. Now that operates throughout the year and is able to provide a temporary accommodation option for people sleeping rough who need to escape hot weather.

We work with all of our specialist support services to ensure that they have a plan in place, particularly when we are looking at things such as extreme heat. We look at the supports they will be able to provide to people that are working with them. That includes people who are working with rough sleepers through assertive outreach and the like.

In terms of Housing ACT tenants, we recognise that we have a range of tenants that have vulnerabilities, so there are specific plans in place to respond when we are looking at extreme weather. I might look to Mr Aigner to provide a bit of detail on some of the things that we go through to ensure that we provide a duty of care, particularly for our vulnerable clients, when we are looking at things such as extreme heat.

Mr Aigner: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question. In the past what we have done is categorise public housing tenants based on age, whether they live alone or not and whether there are any medical supports they require, including a need for air conditioning for whatever medical condition they may have.

There is a trigger in terms of heat or smoke or any other kind of event, which will then initiate a call-out. In the last smoke event, which was three or four years ago now, we did call-outs to over 500 people to check in on their wellbeing, and to make sure they had supports and a plan in place. In the approach to every summer we review those standard operating procedures and whether we have got the age right—for example, the barrier for that. We are in the process of finalising this year's plan right now.

MS CLAY: The plan for what support you need in another smokepocalypse event would be to move somewhere that is not too smoky, I assume. Where would people go?

Mr Aigner: Well, we would not necessarily recommend that people move if it is smoke. It is probably looking at whether there is air conditioning available or fans, or whether they need to maybe move to a friend. We have not really had to move anyone because of that; it is really just making sure that they have the supports that they need.

MS CLAY: Okay. Thank you.

Mr Aigner: Our job is really a connection role in those instances.

Ms Rule: The other program that is worth noting is that we have a series of property condition assessments underway at the moment to look at all of our public housing properties to gather critical information such as insulation and what kinds of appliances are present, as well as the overall property condition. That is underpinning the delivery of capital upgrades such as ceiling insulation and gas appliance replacement, as well as our ongoing budget for maintenance. We are conscious of the fact that some of our stock has not been built to contemporary environmental standards. There is a long-term program of work to rectify that and to ensure that our properties are as fit for purpose as they can be in terms of insulation and appliances and the like. Obviously, that will be a longer term piece of work, but this summer will not be the last when we are having to worry about those types of events, I am sure.

Ms Berry: There has been a lot of work on upgrading and moving from gas appliances to more efficient electric appliances within public housing tenancies. There is also continuing work happening, particularly within the vulnerable housing energy support scheme. The commonwealth has also contributed \$7.2 million for Housing ACT and community housing owned properties to decrease the number of gas appliances or increase the number of replacements for those appliances.

Part of the work that Ms Rule was just referring to is assessing all of those properties to understand what kinds of appliances exist in our properties, and the property condition. We have done over 7,000 now, in phase 1 of the program. You did not go to this detail, did you, Mr Naughton?

Mr Naughton: Seventy-five per cent of our total portfolio is to have property condition assessments by February of next year.

Ms Berry: We had additional funding announced today by the federal government, contributing to the program, so there is a lot happening in this space.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

MR PARTON: Thank you. I do not know where to go. Let me go to Minister Vassarotti on the number of Housing ACT applications, which continues to grow. How is Housing ACT managing this ongoing increase when there are more on the wait list than properties are available, by quite a number?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Parton, for the question. It is the case that we see an increasing number of people who are reaching out for support and putting in applications for public housing. The result of significant pressure around housing affordability in the private sector has seen an increase in applications. Certainly, a lot of work is going on in managing the wait list and ensuring that we are being as responsive as we possibly can be, recognising how many people are on the wait list. I might again look to officials to talk about some of the work that has been happening, looking particularly at things such as the application process and making that as easy as possible for people.

MR PARTON: Additionally, can I ask as part of that sweep: what assistance, if any, is offered to those who, it is very apparent, will be on the wait list for over five years? What assistance and what advice is given to people in that scenario? It is a common scenario.

Ms Vassarotti: It is a really common scenario. Certainly, when people are applying, particularly if there are concerns around risk of homelessness, there is specific advice provided around engaging with OneLink and other community partners, and there is work with people to identify additional opportunities outside public housing, whether it is community housing or connecting with other services.

One thing that I would note is that, while we have seen an increase in the number of public housing applicants, we have seen a decrease in relation to the number of people sitting on the priority waiting list. They are the people that we know are most desperately in need of housing. That is one small element: we are seeing some reduction in that number of people, which is pleasing. But we do recognise that there are still too many people on that list, and the number of people who are sitting on the high needs list continues to be a very large number—almost 1,000 people. I might again look to Mr Aigner to provide a little bit more detail in terms of the support we are providing and how we are responding to the issue of that increasing wait list.

Mr Aigner: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question, Mr Parton. As the minister indicated, we have been doing a lot of work on getting enough time to pay attention to people, particularly those who are on a priority list. It is what I call active holding, which is that, while they are waiting for a property, we check in with them and make sure their needs are being met and they are safe, and we connect them with services. That kind of work is about allowing people to assess their eligibility themselves. They can do that online now for the first time. We are working on a new digital application form which has a staggered release over the next few months. In 2024, it will allow assessments to be done in a more automatic way. All our assessing staff spend time on those who are on the priority list and spend more time on active holding. It will allow them to integrate more on the allocation of properties so we are getting the right property in the first instance for the tenants. We are looking at

pushing much more of our resource into that interaction with tenants because it is a pretty important time, a vulnerable time, for tenants while they are waiting for their property.

MR PARTON: In that same space, transfer applications are still increasing and, of course, we write frequently on behalf of tenants who are struggling while waiting for a transfer. What assistance is offered to people in those situations? And, Minister, what are the main reasons that tenants actually start the process to get a transfer? Why?

Ms Vassarotti: In responding to your second question first, I think the reality is that, like any other household in the community, there are circumstances that change for people. In public housing, often it is about a change to household composition. People have babies and say their housing needs might be quite different to when they first entered into housing. Relationships break down as well. Certainly for a significant number of people who are reaching out for a transfer it is complex, particularly around issues such as the impact of family and domestic violence. That is definitely an issue. We see people that might have accessibility needs. They might have caring responsibilities or actually need a carer and want to be closer to natural support. There is a whole range of reasons why people look to the need to transfer. Again, there is a level of complexity in managing the transfer process.

There is an opportunity for tenants to look at programs such as the mutual exchange program—I think it is a Facebook group—where people can self-identify the kinds of things that they are looking for and see if they can find a match within groups of people that are looking to transfer. The process is to work with Housing to facilitate that transfer. Again I look to Mr Aigner to draw on a little bit more detail about how some of that process works.

Mr Aigner: Thank you, Minister. I have always wanted to do this: Mr Parton, can I ask where you are getting that data from on transfers increasing?

MR PARTON: Apparently page 98, but it was some time ago that we put these questions together.

Ms Vassarotti: I can see why you are asking the question now.

MR PARTON: There were 357 applications to transfer.

Mr Aigner: That is the lowest it has been in four years.

MR PARTON: Is it really?

Mr Aigner: Yes.

MR PARTON: There you go. I always trust you, if we have made an error with a number, to hit it back at me, Mr Aigner.

Mr Aigner: I will take that as a compliment. Thank you. I will speak to it anyway. What the minister has talked about stands. There are a number of issues which drive

people to look for a transfer application. As I indicated earlier, we are trying to get people in the right place the first time, and that is what I will attribute firstly to why the transfer applications are decreasing. We are getting our field staff to engage with tenants rather than just hand over a transfer form and seek to sort out issues that may be happening, particularly at multi-unit properties which may be driving applications. They work with the community.

MR PARTON: Mr Aigner, I am told by people who are paid to make me look good that the wait list online compared to last year's report is indicative of a higher demand for transfers.

Mr Aigner: We will have to check that out.

Ms Berry: Mr Parton, I might follow on from the questions to Minister Vassarotti with regard to the wait list. It is the reason why there is such an investment in public housing in the ACT—\$177 million in this year's budget towards growth, renewal, maintenance and repair. It is in addition to the \$50 million accelerator fund from the federal government, as well as our \$60 million to build more affordable build-to-rent homes in the ACT, and finally having the Housing Australia Future Fund. I tell you what: once that passed, it put a spring in my step because I knew that we could never do this on our own. We needed the support and partnerships with the community sector. Whilst all of that will not immediately make it clearer to provide homes, it is a pipeline of funding that gives us the chance to provide housing opportunities to people who are on our own wait list and other people in our community who need affordable rentals and homes to live in.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, I understand that environmental sustainability has also been a focus for public housing homes being built. Can you tell us what that looks like in practice?

Ms Berry: Yes. Thank you for that question. Before I pass to Mr Naughton for more detail if I miss anything, I can say that for the new homes, as well as making them accessible, as much as possible during construction we make sure that the homes are north facing and take advantage of the northern sun. It is about heating a home in the cooler months in the ACT. There are also sustainable heating and cooling appliances. That makes it more comfortable for tenants, more affordable and more sustainable into the future, and of course there is less impact on our climate. We have double glazing and insulation in roofs. All of our new homes have double glazing, insulation, and more sustainable appliances, as well as window coverings, which is a relatively new item added to our infrastructure plans. Have I missed anything, Mr Naughton?

Mr Naughton: You have nailed it.

Ms Berry: There you go.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Clay, a substantive?

MS CLAY: Thank you, Chair. Minister, the government has given repeated

assurances to the public housing residents of Causeway that, if they want to return to East Lake when the area is redeveloped, they will be able to do so. Can you update me on where that promise is up to?

Ms Berry: I think that Causeway and the whole East Lake development has been put on hold for a moment because there have been a number of complications with regard to the electrical substation that is on one of the sites. I do not have an update on what is going to be happening on that site or time frames at this stage.

MS CLAY: Will there be public housing in that development?

Ms Berry: It is all being considered as part of that project. It has changed from its initial aspiration because of the complications that have been brought to our attention. I do not have an update on what that whole project will look like.

Ms Rule: That is being managed by the Suburban Land Agency. We obviously contribute in terms of what the plans could be for public housing, but the plans around Causeway and East Lake are ones for the SLA.

MS CLAY: Should I ask in that session, perhaps?

Ms Berry: I will be back in that one too.

MS CLAY: Excellent. I will not ask the questions, but I will let you know what they will be about, because that might give us better answers. One is about the promise that all public housing residents can return to the area. Obviously, there will not be detailed designs, but will that continue? Also, will those plans have public housing, community housing and affordable housing as part of them? Those would be the questions. We will revisit those in another session.

Ms Rule: It is relatively small. There are 46 public housing properties currently at Causeway, so, in the grand scheme of a redevelopment there, I would imagine that is a relatively small number. We will continue to work through that with SLA as they ask us to.

MS CLAY: Great. As I said, that other bit of it is about community housing and affordable housing—whether they will be part of it. I will leave it for the other session. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Clay. Mr Parton, on a substantive.

MR PARTON: Thank you. I am back on public housing maintenance, as per page 99 of the report. In the table there, there is a suggestion of 713 vacant property upgrades. Why are properties requiring such extensive work to be completed once they are vacant? That is my initial question.

Ms Berry: There is a range of reasons, Mr Parton, that can include upgrades for people who are moving into the property that might need disability access or it might be modernisation of existing properties once they become vacant. Like any property that becomes vacant, they might need some repairs around general amenity, like

painting or painting repairs. It could be the case that they are at an age where wet areas, kitchens, bathrooms or carpets might need to be completely replaced.

MR PARTON: It is just that the property becoming vacant is seen as an opportunity to do something in the property that could not necessarily be done while it was tenanted?

Ms Berry: That could be one reason. It might be about significant upgrades, so it might be better, when the property is empty, for the property to be completely upgraded. There could be significant damage that has been caused to the property once a tenant has left that means that work needs to be done. I might ask Mr Naughton to go into some detail about that, if he can.

Mr Naughton: Certainly. Thank you for the question. As the minister has outlined, a vacant provides a unique opportunity, particularly with regard to upgrades to wet areas while a resident or a tenant is not in the dwelling. As I am sure the committee can appreciate, a bathroom upgrade and access to be able to upgrade a toilet and a shower means that the property can be without the use of a toilet or bathroom for a period of time. Having the property not tenanted provides a unique opportunity for the week or two that it takes to do that work. Similarly for the kitchen, hard surfaces and floor surfaces. Replacing carpet is a challenge and requires all furniture to be moved. Having a property that is vacant provides the team with an opportunity to undertake an extensive upgrade to the property, as Minister Berry articulated. That means a full paint, replenishment of carpets or looking at assets within the home, such as ovens, air-conditioning or heating systems, and hot water systems, as there is a move away from gas, to see if they need to be changed to electrical appliances. Those sorts of switches are not easy to do and require new circuit boards to be installed in the system that runs the home electrification. We package all those sorts of things so that we get good value for money. In this instance, for the 713 homes that were vacant through the course of this reporting period, we looked where we could undertake significant upgrades of those properties so they could be brought back online.

MR PARTON: Good answer. Thank you. Property condition complaints have increased. This looks like a take-on-notice thing, but I am just going to ask. What are the top three property condition complaints received? Is anyone going to wade in or will we—

Ms Berry: We might have to take that one on notice, Mr Parton.

MR PARTON: That is fine and that is understandable. Tenant-responsible maintenance complaints have increased. What is the reason for this?

Mr Aigner: Thanks for the question. Those complaints generally relate to the invoicing of tenant-responsible maintenance where a tenant has caused some kind of damage to the property and we have determined that it is what we call TRM. We issue an invoice for that. That can then generate a dispute on the charge, and that registers as a complaint.

MR PARTON: Okay. That is cool.

THE CHAIR: Does anyone have a pressing substantive that they would like to ask in the last few minutes?

MS CLAY: I am not sure if the panel will hate me if I say yes.

THE CHAIR: No. Go for it, Ms Clay.

MS CLAY: Excellent. Minister, I do not know if Housing ACT has yet had a chance to look at this, but I am interested in whether you could look at how many sites you have that would be eligible for the recently announced dual occi policy. Have you done that work yet?

Mr Naughton: I am happy to take that question on notice. We do know the land size that each of our dwellings sits on. The team is looking at that at the moment.

MS CLAY: That would be excellent. While you take that on notice, I am also interested in whether housing blocks could have a second dwelling built. They could also be unit titled and sold to allow somebody else to build an affordable house. I am wondering if Housing ACT has done the work to consider that as a prospect?

Ms Berry: The work that Housing ACT has done with regard to the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program has been about making sure that we utilise the land on some of the bigger blocks that we sold to ensure that we can build even more homes—making sure we use the space appropriately on those blocks to provide even more homes for people. Those homes are usually two-bedroom units or townhouses. The reason why those are the ones that we are focusing on is that those are the most required under our waiting list. Those are the kinds of dwellings that we are building for Growing and Renewing. I am absolutely excited for the opportunity to be able to utilise some of the bigger housing blocks as a result of the planning changes. We have been very much engaged in the conversations with Planning about what the opportunities are for Housing to provide even more homes under the most challenging circumstances. These are sometimes hard decisions for Housing ACT to make, because, as I have said previously, we sometimes get many complaints about this kind of building work. I assume that will continue with public housing as we move forward, but, as I said, we will not take our foot off the pedal. We know we need to meet the needs of people in our community who do not have the same kinds of chances as us. As I said, no stone will be left unturned, and we will look at every opportunity to increase the housing supply.

MS CLAY: Thank you, Minister. On the first part of your answer, about looking at building more apartments, which makes perfect sense to me, do you mean that Housing ACT think it is a high priority for more block consolidation and apartments rather than dual occies? Is that what you are saying?

Ms Berry: We will look at the housing list to make sure that we meet the needs of the housing waiting list, and that is where we focus our energy.

THE CHAIR: A substantive, Mr Parton?

MR PARTON: Yes, please. Firstly, one of the people who is paid to make me look

good has further conceded that, even with the online numbers, Mr Aigner, you would appear to be correct, and our assessment was not quite right.

Mr Aigner: Sorry about that, Mr Parton.

Ms Berry: I think you might need to pay them more.

THE CHAIR: If you gave them some extra funding in the staffing budget, that might be a bit different.

MR PARTON: Yes. That is for another hearing.

Ms Berry: I am Acting Treasurer at the moment!

MR PARTON: Ms Vassarotti, in reference to people who were referred to services such as OneLink, what services are available to men, single dads and men escaping domestic violence who are not of Aboriginal descent? What services are available for them in seeking assistance? The suggestion that we get is that there is really nothing.

Ms Vassarotti: A number of services that are gender-specific provide support for men and their families. Certainly, with my understanding around programs, such as when we were able to allocate properties using Common Ground, that was a cohort of people supported through that program. As we have gone through the commissioning process, that has been one of the things that we have been working on: identifying the cohorts of people that require support. As we are working through the commissioning process, we are identifying gender-specific services that specifically look at men and men with dependents. That is something that has been identified through the commissioning process and will be one of the tender processes. I am just looking to officials for any additional information. I think that is a tender that is not actually out yet but it is imminent.

Ms McIntyre: Thank you, Mr Parton, for your question. There are, in the homelessness sector at the moment, a number of programs that specifically support men with accommodation services. There is Samaritan House, which I am sure you would be aware of. That is 12-bed crisis accommodation for single men. In the last financial year, 2022-23, Samaritan House accommodated 63 men.

Ms Vassarotti: I think you were asking about men with families, weren't you?

MR PARTON: Yes—single dads with children. A bit of a hole in the—

Ms McIntyre: Yes; there is a bit of a gap in the sector for single dads.

MR PARTON: Was this identified? I know Ms Rule referred to a mapping exercise with regard to holes in services. Was this identified as a hole in the—

Ms Vassarotti: I was just looking to Ms McIntyre. In terms of one of the imminent tender processes that is specifically around gender services for men, I understood that would enable people to respond to that gap. Is that correct?

Ms McIntyre: Yes. That is correct. There is a tender process happening for men's services. I believe it is an open tender process.

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

Ms McIntyre: That will be occurring.

Ms Vassarotti: We are right in the middle of responding to that gap through our tendering process.

MR PARTON: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I want to thank the ministers and officials for their attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee's secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof of the *Hansard*.

Hearing suspended from 11.15 to 11.32 am

Appearances:

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

Community Services Directorate

Windeyer, Ms Kirsty, Coordinator General, Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Office

Bogiatzis, Ms Vasiliki, Executive Branch Manager, Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Office

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings for the committee's inquiry into the annual and financial reports of 2022-23. I will restate our housekeeping arrangements. All mobile phones and laptops are to be turned off or put on silent mode. Witnesses are to speak one at a time and will need to speak directly into the microphone or your computer for Hansard to be able to hear and transcribe you accurately.

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

Welcome back, Ms Berry, Minister for Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. 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. Could I get you all, please, to confirm that you understand the implications of the statement, and that you agree to comply with it.

Witnesses: Yes.

THE CHAIR: As we are not accepting any opening statements, we will proceed to questions. I am talking about the wraparound. On page 73 of the annual reports, it mentions the reinvigoration of wraparound, a dedicated integrated service model responsive to the needs of sexual violence victims-survivors. When did the original wraparound commence operation, and when and why did it stop?

Ms Bogiatzis: Thank you for the question. I acknowledge and have read the privilege statement. Wraparound first commenced in 2008 following the Sexual Assault Reform Program report that was published in that year.

THE CHAIR: Will it be reinstated, and will it operate in the same way if it is reinstated, or what would be the differences?

Ms Bogiatzis: Wraparound had previously been operated by ACT Policing as a form

of coordinating sexual violence matters that are reported to police, to ensure multi-agency involvement in those matters and to ensure that services are streamlined for victims-survivors.

In 2021, the ACT government undertook the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program, and published a report from the steering committee at that time. Recommendation 3 was to reinstate the wraparound response model. Because of COVID and various other things, it sort of fell off as being delivered. ACT Policing did not have additional resourcing to do that program, so it was something that was not prioritised.

We do intend to reinstate wraparound, and it will be slightly different. The intention is that perhaps ACT Policing would not be the provider of that wraparound coordination response, and we intend to make it a monthly face-to-face meeting to coordinate and address the needs of victims-survivors, including children and young people.

The wraparound response program provides immediate action to improve case coordination and collaboration between criminal justice and sexual violence support agencies whether the matter is proceeding through the criminal justice system or not, which is slightly different to before. We have engaged Stopping Family Violence to undertake sector consultation with wraparound agencies and develop a revised terms of reference for that wraparound coordination model.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned that there were other agencies involved with the initial wraparound service. Who were they?

Ms Bogiatzis: Participating wraparound agencies are Canberra Rape Crisis Centre; Service Assisting Male Survivors of Sexual Assault, SAMSSA, which is run by Canberra Rape Crisis Centre; ACT Policing; Victim Support ACT; Enhanced Child Health Services, which was previously known as CARHU, the Children at Risk Health Unit; Child and Youth Protection Services; Forensic and Medical Sexual Assault Care, FAMSAC; and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

THE CHAIR: If you reinstated the wraparound service, would these agencies be reinvited to participate, and are there any additional agencies that you may consider getting involved?

Ms Bogiatzis: It is not envisaged at this stage, but once it kicks off, should others need to be at the table, we could arrange that.

THE CHAIR: Mr Pettersson has a substantive question.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you. Minister, I am interested in women's perceptions of how safe they feel in Canberra. I noticed that the information in the annual report shows that the proportion of women who feel safe by themselves walking at night is quite low and has not increased over the last five years. In fact, it has decreased slightly. Is this something that you are concerned about, and what is the government doing to try to improve this outcome?

Ms Berry: Mr Pettersson, we went to this question with the Office for Women this

morning. We can talk about it here, but it is really not in this portfolio.

MR PETTERSSON: Sure.

Ms Berry: It crosses over, but it is really within the Office for Women.

MR PETTERSSON: Sure; I will move onto a different question. Minister, am I right that funding for the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Grants program comes from the National Partnership Agreement?

Ms Berry: Yes.

MR PETTERSSON: I note that some organisations received almost half a million dollars, whereas others received \$15,000. How are the funding amounts decided? Is it based on what the organisations apply for?

Ms Berry: Yes, in short.

Ms Bogiatzis: Thank you for the question. The Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Grants Program comprised \$2.075 million, which came from the National Partnership Agreement funding. We also added supplementary funding to that process through the ACT government's Safer Families initiatives.

Broadly, this funding was allocated to support sector training and capability building; consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to inform community-led responses to sexual assault; and enhancing responses to domestic, family and sexual violence generally. We also provided up to \$25,000 to family, domestic and sexual violence recipients to support capability building and training activities. This targeted investment was part of broader work to enhance the capability of the ACT's domestic, family and sexual violence sector.

In relation to how the grants were administered, initially, when we received the National Partnership Agreement funding, the ACT government, ourselves, engaged closely with stakeholders and allied sectors to understand how funding could be used most effectively in the ACT. This included engagement with the ACT's domestic and family violence roundtable, which is a broad group of stakeholders across the sector. This informed the identification of key gaps and priorities in the ACT's services system.

We also, uniquely in this process, worked closely with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders in this space, including the Domestic Violence Prevention Council reference group, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Group, to identify priorities for the grants program. As a result, they helped us identify those priorities, which were: sector sustainability and capability building, specifically for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services but also for mainstream and specialist services; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, domestic and social violence responses; and innovative service responses, with a focus on children and young people.

We then conducted an open grants process and received a number of applications. The

majority of the panel members assessing those grant applications were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and they made recommendations on the allocation of funding to the delegate. That is how we administered that process.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. Thank you.

MRS KIKKERT: How much supplementary funding comes from the ACT government for that service?

Ms Bogiatzis: Thank you for the question.

MRS KIKKERT: You can take it on notice. That is okay.

Ms Bogiatzis: I will take that question on notice.

MRS KIKKERT: Great. Thank you. I would like to talk about the support service for five to 12-year-olds and their mothers provided by the Australian Childhood Foundation. Can you please provide an update on the support service for that age group, when the service commenced, how many children and mothers are funded in the pilot and how many families can apply to participate?

Ms Bogiatzis: The Australian Childhood Foundation is piloting a therapeutic response, and that is a group program tailored specifically to the needs of children and young people aged five to 12 and their mothers who are victims of family violence. The pilot has run since term 1 in 2023, with varying numbers of participants across the two groups that have been established.

Feedback from participants has indicated positive experiences for those participating in the pilot, and the University of Sydney is undertaking an evaluation of the pilot. Early findings from the evaluation indicate that the pilot upholds children's rights and creates a safe environment for children and mothers to foster their reconnection.

Current participation in the pilot for term 1 has been two groups. One of the groups has five members. In term 2 there was one group as well—this is in 2023—with 11 members. In term 3 of 2023 there were 10 members, and an additional four joined later. In term 4 there were eight members. Membership has been fluctuating. There is certainly capacity in the program to take on more members, and they are actively seeking referrals.

MRS KIKKERT: Who is actively seeking referrals?

Ms Bogiatzis: The Australian Childhood Foundation are working closely with other community organisations that support women experiencing domestic and family violence. They have built partnerships with those organisations to receive referrals for them, where there are known children in the family and where the mother chooses to participate in this type of program.

MRS KIKKERT: Are women and children who are not in a women's refuge eligible to participate in it as well, and how will they know about this program?

Ms Bogiatzis: Yes, women and children who are not residing in a refuge are eligible; absolutely. To access the program you would need to be referred in or self-refer. The Australian Childhood Foundation publishes information about the program through its networks, like the child and family centres, at the refuges themselves, through the Domestic Violence Crisis Service and other known services. Child Protection also make referrals into this program.

MRS KIKKERT: Can we go back to the actual program itself. It has been running for four terms now, with a different number of members throughout those terms. How often did they meet a term, and who is participating, except for the members? Is it the members and a counsellor or is it a special child psychiatrist that participates with them?

Ms Bogiatzis: There are two facilitators for the program.

MRS KIKKERT: What is their qualification?

Ms Bogiatzis: I understand that they are qualified in providing therapeutic interventions.

MRS KIKKERT: Therapeutic intervention. Thank you.

Ms Bogiatzis: There are eight sessions delivered per term.

MRS KIKKERT: Where are these sessions usually held?

Ms Bogiatzis: The sessions are being held at the child and family centres across Canberra.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you. The men's behaviour change program Room4Change is delivered by the Domestic Violence Crisis Service. It is the primary men's behaviour change program for perpetrators and their families. Page 73 of the annual report states:

The domestic, family and sexual violence officers will continue to identify and implement innovative pilots aimed at reducing violent and controlling behaviours and increasing perpetrator accountability.

Can you tell us more about these innovative pilots?

Ms Bogiatzis: Thank you. In relation to perpetrator accountability, it is increasingly recognised nationally and internationally that improving responses to and reducing instances of domestic and family violence requires holding those who perpetrate this violence to account.

In relation to pilots for men who use violence, the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children—the National Plan—commits to improving perpetrator responses. The commonwealth government has committed \$25 million over five years, from 2022-23 to 2026-27, to work in partnership with state and territory governments to trial innovative approaches to address family, domestic and sexual violence.

Through this funding, the ACT will receive significant investment over four years to run an innovative perpetrator response pilot. We are in the very early stages of negotiating that funding and receiving that funding. It is anticipated that what we will do with it initially is run a scoping study to understand what innovative perpetrator pilots could be piloted in the ACT, and what exists in other jurisdictions that have proven successful.

The purpose of the scoping study will also help us to understand what pilots could be suitable to respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys who choose to use violence. We anticipate that the operationalisation of a pilot would commence in late 2024 or 2025, following the receipt of that scoping study.

MRS KIKKERT: So, the funding comes from federal. Are other jurisdictions also doing scoping studies to determine how they can best use the funding, or do they already have something—an innovative program—in place, that the government funding could be used for?

Ms Berry: First of all, our innovation was with the Room4Change program. It is one of the only kinds in the country. I think Western Australia has something similar. I am not sure if any other states and territories have a program like that. I guess our scoping study will be to look at what else can we do—what other things we can do to support and change behaviour. It is what we heard at the start with our conversation with the community, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims-survivors, and that continues to be the call today—that they do not want their men locked up; they just want the violence to end.

We are going with that premise, and the scoping study will help us with other kinds of supports, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys—what is it that works for that community—and then perhaps what works for the broader community. And, given the multicultural significance and growth in our own community we would have to look at programs that might be more suited for, or specific to, those particular groups, as well.

I am not sure what other states' and territory's plans are for their share of the funding, but women's safety ministers regularly share and update each other about different things that they are trialling or piloting in their states and territories that might be useful or suitable to use in other places.

MRS KIKKERT: Are there any plans or discussions about implementing Room4Change or any other program for detainees at AMC?

Ms Bogiatzis: I need clarification. Do you mean other jurisdictions?

MRS KIKKERT: No, here.

Ms Bogiatzis: Room4Change does take referrals from men who are leaving AMC.

MRS KIKKERT: And do you have sufficient resources to take them in, or are they on the waiting list?

Ms Bogiatzis: I understand that we do.

MRS KIKKERT: You do? Are there any men on the waiting list at Room4Change, currently?

Ms Windeyer: My understanding is that at this stage there are not men on the waiting list.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: Mr Pettersson, do you have a substantive question?

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, I was hoping the committee could get an update on the development of the multidisciplinary centre.

Ms Berry: Thank you. Yes, we can provide an update on that.

Ms Bogiatzis: Thank you for the question, Mr Pettersson. The multidisciplinary centre is being established in response to recommendation 3b of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Steering Committee's report. MDC will be a place where victims-survivors are supported to choose a pathway that is right for them, that supports recovery and healing.

It will bring services together so victims-survivors experience responsive, coordinated and seamless co-located supports. The design and delivery of the MDC, encompassing recommendations 3a and 3b of the report, will be delivered through one initiative taking a phased approach. Recommendation 3a is about reinstating the wraparound response model, which we have already talked about. Recommendation 3b is about establishing and piloting the multidisciplinary centre for sexual violence, including establishing the role of independent sexual violence advisors.

As we have discussed, in relation to the establishment of the multidisciplinary centre, we are initially focusing on reinvigorating wraparound as a response model, and that will commence in early 2024. In relation to the multidisciplinary centre, this will be done in a second phase. And the reason why we are focusing on wraparound in the first instance is to re-engage criminal justice agencies and other agencies involved in providing sexual violence services. To do this we need to build strong relationships and reinstate strong collaborative approaches between agencies.

The second phase, which we talk about as 3b—that is about the multidisciplinary centre—is expected to be delivered over a longer period, and will involve significant consultation with stakeholders across community and government. It will focus on establishing the multidisciplinary centre and the role of independent sexual violence advisors in that centre. We will be procuring a scoping and feasibility study to support the long-term design and development of the multidisciplinary centre. The study will include consideration of the co-location of a wider range of services in an appropriately located, fit-for-purpose building.

A critical friends group has been established to support the long-term service design

and development of the multidisciplinary centre. This group is advising on key decisions regarding the direction and scope of the MDC model, including how the MDC will integrate with existing services in the broader domestic family and sexual violence sector.

The following members have been invited to participate in this critical friends group. They include the Coordinator-General Chrystina Stanford, CEO of the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre; Paula McGrady, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre and Deputy Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body; Vanita Parekh who is from the Forensic Medical Sexual and Assault Care; Elena Rosenman, CEO Women's Legal Centre ACT; Heidi Yates, the Victims of Crime Commissioner; Sue Webeck, Domestic Violence Crisis Service; ACT Policing. Engaging all of these agencies and ensuring a strong collaboration and building their support of the multidisciplinary centre is critical, and that is why we are focusing on wraparound, and re-instating that, in the first instance.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, has a substantive question.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you, Chair. In 2009, the *We Don't Shoot our Wounded* report was published by the ACT then Victims of Crime Coordinator and informed by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The report contains 12 recommendations and was, unfortunately, somehow lost, ignored or forgotten by the ACT government for over 10 years. Has an official government response to the report and each of its recommendation been published? And, if not, when can a response be expected?

Ms Berry: We worked with the Domestic Violence Prevention Council to set up a subgroup of that council to directly respond to the recommendations in that report. That work is ongoing. Do we have an update on where things are up to?

Ms Windeyer: Yes; we do. The reference group has met a number of times and in 2020 they did community and other consultation in relation to the recommendations in the *We Don't Shoot our Wounded* report. They have identified four priority recommendations for action from the ACT government, which they have communicated to us.

Those recommendations are recommendation 4, which is to establish a specific service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, where a range of legal, advocacy, practical and healing activities can be delivered; recommendation 8, to develop a coordinated approach to supporting children and young people affected by family violence that recognises the importance of education and family, and which offers practical, sustainable and nonpunitive support to the parent who is also a victim of violence; recommendation 9, advocacy assistance and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from the time they report to police through to prosecution and court processes, and linked to victim support measures aimed at securing their personal, financial and social stability and security; recommendation 10, to identify and implement a range of healing, support, advocacy and other interventions focused on addressing the trauma and harm from family violence.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference group is currently working on a consultation report flowing from the consultations, which they intend to present to government in relation to the priorities but also other things that have come out of that report. In the meantime, in partnership with that group as well as the emerging Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in the domestic family and sexual violence area, we are working together in order to implement the recommendations.

MRS KIKKERT: And would there be a committee to oversee these recommendations being implemented so that we make sure that recommendations are actually being implemented rather than waiting for years or even a decade for them to be identified and then they are not implemented at all?

Ms Windeyer: Yes. There is a clear process now. You might recall that last year and this year there was new legislation in relation to the Domestic Violence Prevention Council, and there are new members of the Domestic Violence Prevention Council, which is the overarching body, to provide advice and to monitor. And then the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference group sits under that—as we call it, the DVPC. One of the standing items on the agenda of the Domestic Violence Prevention Council is implementation of the *We Don't Shoot our Wounded* report recommendations. And that is being monitored by the DVPC in conjunction with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference group.

MRS KIKKER: Great. So, in a year's time there should be good outcomes from the recommendations?

Ms Windeyer: Yes. And I think we have been getting good outcomes in the last year, certainly.

MRS KIKKERT: Great. I am looking forward to it. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: Given that it is now 12 o'clock, on behalf of the committee we would like to thank the minister and officials for attending. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. The committee will suspend proceedings for lunch and reconvene at 1 pm. Thank you.

Hearing suspended from 12.01 pm to 1 pm.

Appearances:

Stephen-Smith, Ms Rachel, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs,
Minister for Families and Community Services and Minister for Health

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

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

Lapic, Ms Silvia, Executive Group Manager (Deputy), Children, Youth and
Families

Perkins, Ms Anita, Executive Group Manager, Communities

Evans, Ms Jacinta, Executive Group Manager, Strategic Policy

Bassett, Dr Louise, Executive Branch Manager, Commissioning, Policy and
Service Design, Strategic Policy

Chen, Ms Mimy, Centre Manager, Support Services for Children,
Communities

West, Ms Kate, Executive Branch Manager, Next Steps Reform and Strategy
Implementation, Children, Youth and Families

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings for this committee’s inquiry into the annual and financial reports of 2022-2023. The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses could use the words, “I will take that question on notice” or words to that effect. This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We welcome, Minister Stephen-Smith, and her ministry officials. The minister is here in her capacity as Minister for Families and Community Services. I want to remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. 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. Can I confirm with you all that you have read the privilege statement, and you agree and will comply with that statement?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Yes.

THE CHAIR: That was in unison, thank you.

Ms Stephen-Smith: We have been practising all week!

THE CHAIR: As we are not taking opening statements, we will go straight to questions.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you very much, Chair. I want to talk about the excessive time for freedom of information requests. Page 151 of the annual report notes that a large volume of freedom of information requests has made meeting the statutory time frames more challenging and that the current budget includes extra funding to try to

fix this problem.

In just the past month, I personally have seen an FOI request that was made on 10 October 2022 with a decision postponed to 9 October this year, but then an extension was granted until 7 March 2025. Why does the CSD need two and a half years to complete an FOI request?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I will just start with very quick, high level answer to that, and we did talk about this in some detail at the last hearings as well. Some of the FOI requests that CSD receives are for entire client records of, for example, a young person who has been in care for many years. It is thousands and thousands of pages, each one of which needs to be examined and redacted appropriately, and there are also a large number of these very large applications.

There is substantial work underway, both to work with applicants but also to work with the Ombudsman and to work through the internal processes as well, to try and address some of the challenges. Because also, quite clearly, for most people, receiving that volume of information in that format is actually not particularly helpful for them. Having made that high level statement, I will hand over to Ms Rule to talk about the detail.

Ms Rule: Thank you, Minister. Just to give you a bit more data, I would point out that in the last financial year, 70 per cent of the directorate's FOIs were, on average, completed within 77 days, so two years is not a typical time frame. We do try to process the majority of them in a much quicker time frame than that. We did, however, in the last financial year see a 15 per cent increase in the number of applications from the previous year, so it is an area of significant demand in the directorate.

As the minister said, many of the requests that we get for FOI access to documents are very large and very complex, and often involve records of thousands of pages that are very old and very much in paper form. The process of searching for and sourcing those records and then having to review the records, and in some cases redact information that is not relevant to the freedom of information request, is a very lengthy process, but we are conscious of the need to be improving the timeliness of FOI processing.

As was said, we did get some additional funding in the budget, as well as supplementing from other areas of the directorate's budget some additional positions. We will now have 17 FTE in CSD processing FOI claims. My understanding is that that is actually the highest by a very long way of any other directorate, which is symbolic of the nature of the FOI queries that we field within CSD.

MRS KIKKERT: Do you have a rough estimate of how many other FOI requests have taken one year or longer to complete?

Ms Rule: I would have to take that question on notice, Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. What is the average length of time it is taking CSD to complete an FOI request?

Ms Rule: As I said, 70 per cent of our FOIs were completed on average within 77 days.

MRS KIKKERT: Seventy-seven days, okay. Do you consider it acceptable for Canberrans to wait almost two and a half years to access information about their own children?

Ms Rule: I think I have been clear that we are taking a lot of steps to improve performance in this regard, but that is not our typical performance, which is 70 per cent within 77 days.

Ms Stephen-Smith: I think the other thing I would say, and I mentioned earlier, is that the directorate often works with applicants to try to understand how there is a limit to what the directorate can do, because my understanding is, legally, they are not allowed to ask an applicant the purpose for which they have made the freedom of information request. That does limit the extent of detailed conversation they can have with an applicant to work with them to narrow down the information that may be most useful for them. But most of those very large FOI requests are released in stages, or tranches. I do not think I have ever seen an FOI report from my directorate where someone has waited two and a half years to get any information at all. Information would generally be released in a staged way, and the directorate would be working with the applicant to explain that staged process. Correct me if I am wrong.

Ms Rule: That is correct, Minister.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, can you please provide the committee with an update on the pilot program linking child and family centres with local primary schools?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I can hand over to Ms Chen to do that.

Ms Chen: We have a pilot happening at three different schools, currently, across Canberra. We started at Evatt Primary School for the first few terms, term 2 and term 3 this year, and currently we have Kingsford Smith School at Belconnen, and we are in Margaret Hendry over at Gungahlin. We also started at Gordon Primary School in term 2, then we went to Calwell Primary School, and now we are in Isabella Plains Early Childhood School. This is through consultation. It was a collaborative approach with the Community Services Directorate and the Education Directorate.

MR PETTERSSON: That is great. What sort of services are provided through the program?

Ms Chen: The idea is to have a child and family centre embedded in the school one day a week to provide referral pathways, build parenting capacity and link back into the child and family centres, as well as to appropriate referrals to other services.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. What has the response been like from families and the community more broadly?

Ms Chen: It has been really good. The feedback has been extremely positive. Our staff have been really grateful to have had the opportunity to be working with our colleagues in education. The families have been really grateful to have someone onsite on a regular day where they can approach them to talk about issues. The children and the staff at the schools have come back saying that it has been really helpful for them as well. One of the schools actually approached us and said they were able to get some traction with some of the families that they had not able to get some traction with, and from there we work collaboratively in supporting the children of the community.

Ms Rule: Mr Pettersson, we know that therapeutic services work best in natural settings, and the school is a very natural setting where the children are already present; the families are already accessing the schools. So, where a family may not reach out to a range of service providers through the child and family centres, they are able to access those services in that natural setting of the school, which means that these pilots have been really successful at connecting families, who we might not otherwise see, into a whole range of services. That allows the children to get the services that they need as quickly as possible. It has been a very positive process of us being out in the schools rather than staff being exclusively in the centres.

MR PETTERSSON: The feedback sounds wonderful. What do the next steps look like? You have already, seemingly, expanded this pilot; is there a continued expansion of the pilot or are you looking to make this permanent?

Ms Rule: I think we will continue to look at this as a model of service delivery. It is using our existing resources in the child and family centres—just in a different way. We will continue to look for opportunities to work with schools and to get those staff out into those school settings.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful, thank you.

MRS KIKKERT: On page 70 of the annual report it mentions the development and implementation of external review processes for child protection decisions as a future direction. An answer to a question on notice from this year's estimates hearings states that a report recommending a model for this process was expected to be released in September 2023. Has this report been released, and if not, what is the hold up?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I think it is about to be released, and I do apologise. It may already be on the website, and I was going—

Ms Rule: I think Dr Bassett just said that it is on the website.

MRS KIKKERT: It is on the website, so it has been released?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I am sorry; it is possible that I am sitting on a letter to you, Mrs Kikkert, to let you know that it is on the website. I know that I was writing to stakeholders and to you, and the letters themselves just needed some updating. So the report went on the website, but you have not got the letter yet—apologies for that.

MRS KIKKERT: That is good news; thank you. Minister, are you still confident that

this reform will be implemented before the end of this government's term as promised during estimates?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I think what we talked about during estimates was the second stage of the Children and Young People Act legislative changes. We have just passed the first stage of legislative changes in the last sitting week, and the legislative change that is needed to establish the external merits review will be part of the CYP Act stage 2 reforms. We absolutely intend to try our very best to get that legislation passed by the end of this term. Obviously, that will be in part dependent on processes of the Assembly, but we do intend to introduce that legislation early next year and with the intention of passing it before caretaker. But that will not mean that the service is stood up; that will mean that the legislation is passed to enable that service to be stood up.

MRS KIKKERT: Of course—understood. Thank you, Minister.

THE CHAIR: The annual report shows a five-year decline in client satisfaction with the child and family centres. How much of this decline is a result of high demand mixed with understaffing?

Ms Rule: I am not sure we can be quite so precise as to pinpoint exactly what proportion of the decline is attributable to demand versus staffing. They are parts of the same equation, if you like. We know that there is demand for services, but we have seen, through things like the pilot of getting out into schools, approaches that are making our services more accessible and improving those services. But there are some services that we know are in demand, and there continue to be people waiting for some services. I cannot quite pinpoint exactly the reason for the shift in those client satisfaction rates, but I can point to a number of things that we are doing to try and improve those client satisfactions.

THE CHAIR: The annual report suggests that the increased complexity in intake matters for families presenting at the child and family centres is responsible for some of the decline in client satisfaction. Are the centres struggling to help families with complex needs to address them to their satisfaction.

Ms Rule: I think that is true. I think we are seeing families with more complex needs. We are also seeing, I think, a bit of a bounce-back post COVID. For example, we know that there are some therapeutic services that people were unable to access in COVID that they are now seeking. And for children in those early years, who may have accessed those services, we are now playing a bit of catch-up, if you like, in some of that service delivery, where those services were not available in COVID.

THE CHAIR: Is there any more that is being done to address this emerging situation before it gets any worse?

Ms Rule: As I said, I think we are continuing a range of programs through the centres but also looking at different models of service delivery like working with the schools to ascertain what those unmet needs might be and how we can better connect families to the services they need.

MRS KIKKERT: Ms Rule, what are the services that you mentioned earlier that

people are asking for?

Ms Rule: I think it is all of the services that we provide out of the centres. Ms Chen or Ms Perkins might be able to provide a few more specifics about where we are seeing higher demand in particular.

Ms Chen: We are seeing more increased demand for services, but it is in areas like child behaviour and anxiety, domestic and family violence issues, mental health concerns, family relationship dispute issues and, more recently, more financial pressures on the family; all of those. We are seeing a more of those through the intake coming through our doors.

MRS KIKKERT: You just said that domestic violence victims are looking for family support. Is that what you said? How will you be addressing those issues?

Ms Chen: It is about providing support for the families by making sure they are linked to the relevant agencies: domestic violence services, women's legal services, and providing them with safety planning.

MRS KIKKERT: So it is just a referral mechanism for them. You will not be offering any services within the centre; they are referrals?

Ms Chen: We do provide case management. What happens is that when a family comes through our door we do a thorough screening and assessment. From there they can access a range of services from our centre and there will be ongoing case management, where they get assigned a worker to work with them on a regular basis. They may be linked into our parenting groups, our playgroups or our child behaviour and emotional wellbeing clinic, depending on the need. That is what we will do at the intake. That is the first assessment we do with the families when they come through our doors.

MRS KIKKERT: So a family comes in, you assess them and then you refer them on to a service that will provide for their needs.

Ms Rule: There are also some services that we provide in-house—for example, in the allied health space, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy, drop-in clinics, and those sorts of things. There may be services provided by us, but there may also be referrals to other specialist services that are provided by us in the centres.

MRS KIKKERT: Just going back to the survey, showing a decline in client satisfaction, do you have any idea whether some of them are dissatisfied with the referral process?

Ms Rule: I do not actually have that information to hand. Can I please take that question on notice?

MRS KIKKERT: Yes; thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, a key priority for this year has been the design and establishment of a new therapeutic support system to support raising the minimum

age of criminal responsibility. Can you please outline for the committee what this new service system looks like and what new services are being established to support young people being diverted away from the criminal justice system?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Thank you, Mr Pettersson. This is really around providing a continuum of support that provides intervention and support for children and their families as early as possible when a child's behaviour starts to become of concern. I will hand over to Ms Evans to talk about the detail of the work.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mr Pettersson, for the question. We are at a very exciting point, with the passing of the legislation, and we are just waiting for the legislation to be notified and commence very soon, in the next few days or week. At that point, what we will have in place is an interim service response. We are providing for children and young people under the minimum age of criminal responsibility to get the therapeutic support and the services that they need. The interim response is simply that we have not yet finalised one of the key parts of the ongoing therapeutic response, which is the therapeutic support panel.

We are currently recruiting. We have had a really strong response to our call for people to form the panel. It will have 12 members. It will have a chair and 11 members. The response, as I said, has been really strong, and we are working our way through the process of interviewing and assessing the applications. The panel will be stood up as soon as that recruitment is completed, which will be quite soon. We expect to have it commence early in the new year, I would say. We certainly have a commitment that it will be underway by March of next year.

The interim, in the meantime, utilising existing legislation, is to ensure that children can access services and supports, should they need to. Any referral can still be made; they just will not be going to the panel yet. The sort of supports and services that we are looking for are really, really broad. The intent of raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility is, of course, to make sure that children can access the best possible supports and services without needing to enter into a statutory system—the youth justice system et cetera.

We are really looking at what families and children need. That could be to do with their education, it could be to do with their health, it could be to do with addictive behaviours or it could be to do with mental health issues. It is a very broad range of supports and services that we will need to access to make sure that these children and their families get the best therapeutic support.

When we are talking about children as young as 10 and 11, we need to be thinking about them in the service system but also within their family, as part of that ecosystem—and their schools; I think someone referred earlier to that natural setting. That is also a place children are regularly in, so we are working closely with colleagues in Education as well to determine what the supports and services might look like.

We are at a really exciting point where we are utilising this interim time to see what supports and services may be called on. We do consider the government's commitment to stage the raising of the age really beneficial, because in this first

couple of years we have a lot fewer children under the age of 12 who would previously have been found criminal responsible.

While we have a smaller number of children who will be accessing the supports and services through this new service response, we can really gather that data. We can look at what are the demands on the services, what we will need to put more funding into or what demand is there, so that when the next stage is reached we will be well and truly ready for, potentially, a greater number of children—or we will have worked out better diversionary supports and services and we will not have a greater number of children. That would also be a good outcome. I hope that responds to your question.

MR PETTERSSON: That is very helpful. In regard to the therapeutic support panel, you have definitely touched upon the time line and what it will look like. Can you explain to the committee how it will work?

Ms Evans: I can. Of course, the chair and the minister will have some conversations and will narrow down exactly how it will operate. Basically, we are working on standard operating procedures at the moment. With the referral process, there will be an intake process. A person—a teacher, for instance—will be able to explain what concerns they have about the young person. At that point we will make sure that the appropriate supports and services that are freely available are already in place. For instance, if it was with a school, we would ask, “What pathways have they had at school? What supports? Have you done anything different? Are they attending school?” Those sorts of questions will be asked, as a bit of a starting point.

If a threshold is reached where we think that this young person’s needs are greater than what the regular service system could provide, they will be referred to the panel, and those members will have the support of caseworkers. The caseworker will be able to look at the child’s case notes, if you like, and what issues they are experiencing, and give some advice to the panel around what might be needed.

The panel members will then bring to bear all of their experience. It involves a whole range of different professional people—people with experience in youth justice, criminology, education and psychology, and all of the different things. They will then consider what would be a really good therapeutic plan for the young person and, when the plan is developed, the caseworkers will also work with the family and the child to get those things in place that are recommended in the plan. That is the basic pathway through to the panel.

MRS KIKKERT: With the panel members, is that part of their full-time jobs? You spoke about professionals, teachers. They are full-time teachers, and this is a volunteer type of role that they have?

Ms Evans: It depends on their employment status. The chair is a full-time role. The other members, except for where they are employed by the government, would receive their reimbursement as a per diem. Depending on how many meetings they are called to, they will be paid per meeting. The Remuneration Tribunal has set an appropriate amount of compensation for those meetings. For government members, when we put time into these kinds of things, that is considered to be part of our existing role.

MRS KIKKERT: Those meetings will be scheduled according to the cases?

Ms Evans: That is right, and might not always—

MRS KIKKERT: They will not have a monthly meeting or something like that?

Ms Evans: No. They might not need all 12 people for each one. The chair may decide that they do want to have a regular meeting. I do not know how frequently that might be, but it might be to bring everyone together to talk about what cases have come through, and that sort of thing. But the specific meetings about a particular child will be as required and might not need all 12 people.

MRS KIKKERT: Why do you think it will not need all 12?

Ms Evans: It would depend on the child's needs. If they have, for instance, a known mental health disorder, the panel members that might be the most useful might be people with expertise in that area, as opposed to someone with a different expertise. It will be up to the chair to determine whether it is useful to have everybody at the table. They will still all get to see this information, but they might come back together as a smaller group, to really interrogate it and work out what the plan might look like.

Ms Rule: One obvious example is that we are expecting to have people who have expertise in dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. If the young person who we are dealing with on a given day is not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, you would not need that expertise. It is about sourcing the right experts in the right set of circumstances.

MRS KIKKERT: Pages 91 and 92 of the annual report mention the 12-month pilot of internal review of child protection decisions, and notes that the directorate will undertake a review and collate quantitative and qualitative measures to inform next steps. I asked about this during hearings last year; however, there had been only two requests for internal review during the first four months of the pilot, and one of them was deemed ineligible. Over the 12 months of the pilot, how many requests for internal review were there and, of these, how many were completed?

Ms Sabellico: Yes, the internal review of decisions started out as a pilot, but after six months, and with the numbers that we had, we agreed that we needed to embed it as business as usual, so we no longer frame it as a pilot. Since it started, we have now received 15 requests for internal review of decisions, and I know another one has just come in this morning, so that would make 16.

MRS KIKKERT: Of the total internal reviews that were completed, how many resulted in a changed decision, and what were those changes?

Ms Sabellico: I can tell you that six were satisfactorily resolved with the applicants, of those that went through stage 1. With those that went through stage 2, there was one that was also satisfactorily resolved with the applicant. We have not had any matters yet that have had to escalate to a decision review panel. That would be where the applicant is not satisfied. Two of the matters at the moment are in review again

because of issues that have arisen by the applicant with the outcome, so we are looking at those.

MRS KIKKERT: Did you obtain sufficient data from this pilot to engage in a valid evaluation of the pilot?

Ms Sabellico: We established an evaluation framework at the beginning of the pilot. We undertook an evaluation of the matters that had gone through in the first six months, and we will undertake another evaluation against that outcomes framework at the end of March 2024.

MRS KIKKERT: What early conclusion are you taking away from the pilot that made you want to make it business as usual?

Ms Sabellico: We certainly need to do more work to inform everybody about their rights for internal reviews. We need to do more work with our caseworkers who are working with families to ensure that everybody understands that, if they would like a review of decisions that are eligible for review, they have that information up-front, as part of the work that is being undertaking. We are also working to make sure that the children's advocate and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interim advocate have the information to pass on to people to ask for internal review. We have provided information to a number of our NGO partners, and we will continue to deliver updates to the project and information so that they can make that available to anybody that is going to them to seek support.

MRS KIKKERT: That is a good outcome. Who is conducting the pilot review?

Ms Sabellico: We did that internally. We had a governance body that came together to look at that information.

MRS KIKKERT: Is the governance body within the directorate?

Ms Sabellico: Yes. We had directorate people and people from outside the directorate on the governance body.

MRS KIKKERT: Who were those outside people?

Ms Sabellico: I would have to take that on notice, Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: That is okay; thank you.

Ms Rule: Chair, could I beg your indulgence to go back to the child and family centres?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Rule: We were not quick enough to follow the bouncing ball here. On page 417 of the annual report it lists client satisfaction with services in relation to the child and family centres, and satisfaction has actually gone up. Our target was 90 per cent, and our results for this financial year were 94 per cent. I think it is a success story rather

than—

THE CHAIR: What were they in the previous year?

Ms Rule: I do not have that in front of me, but it is certainly above the target, so it is a good outcome.

THE CHAIR: There was a question taken on notice during the hearings last year in relation to a stage 2 review of A Step Up for Our Kids. The minister stated that this review would be completed and released during 2023. Has this review been done and has it been published? Is it publicly available? It is about the stage 2 review of A Step Up For our Kids.

Ms Sabellico: If what you are talking about, Mr Milligan, is the stage 2 review of the performance data that was undertaken as part of A Step Up For our Kids, that has been completed and it has been provided to all of those that participated. I believe it has also informed the learnings for the development of the Next Steps strategy, which is also currently in the public domain, as well as all of the information that has gone towards informing that strategy. The performance data will be part of that, and the learnings from that.

THE CHAIR: Has that been made publicly available or is it just internal?

Ms Sabellico: I do not know whether that one has been made publicly available. Certainly, the findings from it have gone into listening reports to inform where we need to head with the Next Steps strategy.

Ms Stephen-Smith: There are quite a lot of background documents available around the Next Steps strategy. There is a lot of summary information about what occurred through the A Step Up For our Kids time line, the changes that were made and the impact of that change, including data reporting out of that. I am also not aware of whether there is an actual evaluation report that informed that but which is not itself available. Kate, do you know the answer?

Ms West: I will have to take that question on notice.

MRS KIKKERT: I refer to the surge in demand caused by staff vacancies. For years I have raised concerns that the target for occasions of service at the child and family centres has remained flat at 8,250 and that planning for future demand was unclear. Page 83 of the annual report reveals that the target for 2022-23 was finally lifted to 9,500. At the same time occasions of service surged 31 per cent above the new target, reaching 12,489, as a result of what the report calls “high levels of demand”. Page 417 of the annual report, however, shows a five per cent drop in expenditure at the centres, mainly due to staff vacancies. What are the cause and extent of these vacancies?

Ms Perkins: Both for the occasions of service and for the parenting sessions targets, we have seen increases in those targets over the last financial year. I will start with occasions of service.

We have seen the further uptake of people coming into the centres with the

post-COVID impacts. During the COVID years, our numbers were low, and people were not accessing services in the ways that they had done previously. Since we are returning to the new normal with COVID, the centres have become a lot busier, with that uptake of people coming in at a higher level, and there is higher demand.

As we heard from Ms Chen earlier, with the work that we are doing with schools, and as we are embedding further referral pathways, we are more actively putting the child and family centres on the map, which means more people are coming in, and there is the increase in the occasions of service. It is pleasing to see, with the reinstating of the service offering post COVID, that increase in the numbers.

With the parenting sessions, similarly, we are seeing that uptake in people coming in post COVID. We have also been working through our business processes and our capturing of data. We have a new customer relationship management system that is a couple of years old and we have been bedding that down, particularly over the last year, as it has settled into business-as-usual. We have done a little process to delve into the data and make sure that we are capturing it consistently across all of the CFCs, and providing that quality assurance process. We are using the client management system as best we can to make sure that we have as much data as possible.

Having undertaken that process, and also reflecting on the demand that the centres have been seeing post COVID, that has confirmed that demand is higher than we have seen in the last few years.

Ms Stephen-Smith: The only other thing I would add to that, in relation to the target and the actual, and the variance between the two, Mrs Kikkert, is that the target was set at the beginning of the year. This work in relation to better understanding the data through the relationship management system has been happening throughout the year. In looking at our targets for next year, we will now have better information about what our actual client throughput is, to inform the next target.

MRS KIKKERT: What has been the impact on the child and family centres when they are providing historically a high number of occasions of service while suffering from staff vacancies? What has been the impact on families seeking service?

Ms Perkins: Currently, we are having difficulty recruiting to the positions, but we have still managed to provide a range of services at the child and family centres, including case management, supported play groups and parenting groups. We are also seeking more partnerships with external agencies to deliver those programs.

MRS KIKKERT: What jobs are you struggling to recruit to?

Ms Perkins: Why are we struggling?

MRS KIKKERT: What jobs? What are the roles?

Ms Perkins: The child and family centre worker—social workers.

MRS KIKKERT: Social workers in particular? Any other roles?

Ms Perkins: We are a multidisciplinary team, so we have teachers, psychologists—

MRS KIKKERT: How many vacancies currently need to be filled, and what are their roles?

Ms Rule: We can take that breakdown on notice. I think it would be reasonable to say that the Child and Family Centres are not immune from the workforce shortages that every other part of the service system is facing. Allied health workers and therapeutic workers, like social workers and others, are in high demand across all service systems, and the Child and Family Centres are experiencing difficulties like other parts of the system. We have looked at doing some things like making sure that the jobs are paid at the right level. We have done some work around permanency, so, instead of offering short-term positions, we offer permanent positions because that is more attractive. We have also talked to our colleagues in the Health Directorate, who are another big consumer, if you like, of these sorts of job families. We are also doing some workforce planning in the directorate about where our areas of highest need are and what some creative solutions are that we might be able to work through to source more workforce for some of the areas where the skill shortages are real.

MRS KIKKERT: How has this impacted families seeking services?

Ms Rule: I think we have talked already about that meaning that demand is difficult to meet sometimes, but you can see from the number of occasions of service that we have still been able to deliver a high number. The team works exceptionally hard to make sure that those services are provided. We are working to make sure that much of our staff effort goes into frontline client-facing work rather than back office things—things that take away from their ability to deliver services. They are maintaining a high level of service. There is some unmet demand, as we have already talked about, and we are doing some work in the longer term to look at how we secure better workforce supply.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Do you have another substantive?

MRS KIKKERT: Am I just going to ask questions?

THE CHAIR: If you indicate that this is a new substantive, that will save me doing anything and you can run the show!

MRS KIKKERT: I have a new question. Thank you, Chair. Which of the programs listed on page 79 to 81 of the annual report are new to the reporting year?

Ms Rule: I do not have the table in front of me. We could flip back and forth between the two, but we could also take that on notice, if that would be okay, Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: Yes.

Ms Stephen-Smith: Ms Chen might be able to go through the list and quickly identify any that are new. I am not sure that any of them are new.

Ms Rule: The question is: on page 79 to 81 of the annual report, are any of those programs new compared to the previous year? Do you know off the top of your head? If you do not, we will take that question on notice.

Ms Chen: No; they are not.

Ms Rule: They are all continuing programs.

Ms Chen: Yes—that we have delivered in the past.

MRS KIKKERT: You will take that on notice?

Ms Rule: No. The answer is that they are all continuing programs.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you. This is a new question, thanks, Chair. Page 129 of the annual report addresses concerns raised by foster and kinship carers. In response to a question on notice from last year's hearings, the minister wrote that the commitment from Child and Youth Protection Services and ACT Together to convene the monthly Carer Wellbeing Joint Committee meeting had improved. Over the past year, has this important meeting continued to be convened on a monthly basis as intended?

Ms Rule: Ms Lopic will answer that question.

Ms Lopic: Yes. It has been convened each month.

MRS KIKKERT: What has been the feedback from the foster carers and kinship carers at these meetings?

Ms Lopic: The feedback has been varied each and every month. We have a standing agenda item where we open the meeting by asking carers for their open and honest feedback about the last month and any comments that they would like to make. Many of the carers talk about their own experience but also the experiences of other carers in the community. For the most part, they will raise specific issues that might include procedural or process issues they would like to bring to the attention of the group. It may be a thematic issue that they talk about in general terms about carer wellbeing or they may bring good-news stories about some of the support groups that they have accessed. The feedback is varied.

MRS KIKKERT: You mentioned feedback about carers' wellbeing. What are they talking about when they are going through certain trials as a carer, and how is the government addressing those issues?

Ms Lopic: In terms of the feedback, as I mentioned, it is quite varied, and it sometimes depends on the time frame. Some new carers have different challenges to those that may be existing carers. New carer groups will say that it is quite challenging. There are new processes and new rules. They do not know where to go for certain services and processes. We been able to develop an orientation training session, co-designed with the Carer Wellbeing Joint Committee. We run face-to-face sessions with carers and go through a key number of different phases of the process

that they need to understand. The feedback from the carer orientation sessions has been really positive, and we are going to continue doing those in the new year.

Secondary feedback from that is that carers who have been in the system for more than 12 months have said, “We would like something similar but more tailored to our needs,” so we are currently developing an enhanced carer training program in that sense and to look at what stage 2 would look like. Once you have done the first 12 months, what would the next phase look like? That is just one example of many strategies that we are looking at to support carers.

MRS KIKKERT: What are other areas that carers are providing feedback on in terms of their wellbeing? Besides the support that you are giving the new carers and carers who have been there for 12 months, what other support are you giving them?

Ms Lopic: If I think about very specific strategies, one would be around our carer support worker. We currently have a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship support worker that has recently commenced in response to some of the specific needs of our First Nations carers. That particular worker is able to link carers to services. There is an inbox that carers can email about specific requests that they might have. Sometimes they are practical types of assistance and sometimes it might be about access to training and support. There are also opportunities in the carer support space to raise an issue: “Where do I go if I am having this type of issue?” It is a bit more of a service co-ordination point. We have a dedicated carer support worker for all carers and one for First Nations carers too. That is another—

Ms Rule: Mrs Kikkert, carers who have connected to ACT Together also have dedicated carer support workers that work with them. One of the roles of ACT Together is to support carers with regular check-ins and discussions about accessing the services or supports that they may need. That is a hardwired part of the system that is provided by ACT Together.

MRS KIKKERT: How many carers usually attend these meetings?

Ms Lopic: If I think about a ballpark figure, we would see an average of 10, I would say.

MRS KIKKERT: How many child protection foster carers are listed in the government register? You can take it on notice.

Ms Lopic: Overall, there are about 800-odd carers, on average.

MRS KIKKERT: Has that increased in the last year?

Ms Stephen-Smith: That will be included. I will be tabling in the next sitting period the updated out-of-home-care data report. That includes the number of carers that are in the system and have children in their care. If you are happy to wait until then rather than us taking it on notice, that will be tabled in the next sitting week.

MRS KIKKERT: Yes. Okay.

Ms Stephen-Smith: In relation to the 10 people, just to be clear, it is a reference group; it is not a forum that is open to all carers.

MRS KIKKERT: There are 10 people that attend the reference group? Are there just 10 or are there more than 10?

Ms Evans: It depends on our carer obligations and needs. It might be that we have 10, on average, but I think there are 15 currently registered to be part of this committee. We have ACT Together, Carers ACT and us, so, altogether there would be about 15.

MRS KIKKERT: Great. Thank you. I have a new question, please, Chair. In an answer to a question on notice from last year's annual report hearing, we understand that 20 families had accessed supports on site at Ruby's House, with 13 young people accessing overnight accommodation. Since its opening on 20 June 2022 until now, how many young people have accessed overnight accommodation at Ruby's House?

Ms Evans: Minister, I would have to take that on notice. I do not have that level of detail.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. In the reporting year, how many young people are accommodated at Ruby's House on an average night?

Ms Evans: Again, I am sorry, Mrs Kikkert, but I am very happy to take all those details on notice.

MRS KIKKERT: You will maybe take this one on notice as well. I am not sure. You might know. How many of the young people return home safely?

Ms Evans: I will prepare a thorough response to all your questions on Ruby's House.

MRS KIKKERT: Great. The final one is: since its opening until now, how many families have engaged in supports on-site at Ruby's House?

Ms Evans: Thank you, Mrs Kikkert. I will take that on notice.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you. Finally, Ms Rule, you referred to the table about the satisfaction survey. Is that the table on page 429?

Ms Rule: No. I am referring to the table on page 417.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. The client satisfaction survey is on page 429, but—

Ms Rule: For Child and Family Centres?

MRS KIKKERT: Yes. The Child and Family Centre client satisfaction survey is on page 429.

Ms Rule: It is also on page 417.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. It has gone down. On page 429, in 2021 to 2022 it was 96

per cent; in 2022 to 2023 it was 95 per cent; in 2020 to 2021 it was 97.3 per cent; in 2019 to 2020 it was 98.6 per cent; and in 2018 to 2019 it was 99 per cent. So it has dropped. Which one are you referring to?

Ms Rule: It is possible that the committee has helped us identify an error in the annual report. The table, from which you have just read out the successive years, says that client satisfaction is 95 per cent. On page 417, the number is 94 per cent, so we will need to check the data to see what the right number is. It may be a rounding error or it may be a transcription error, but I would have thought they should be the same.

MRS KIKKERT: If it was 94 per cent, in previous years it has been greater than 94 per cent.

Ms Rule: The point I was trying to make based on the data on page 4 and 7 is that client satisfaction is above the target of 90 per cent.

MRS KIKKERT: What were the targets in previous years?

Ms Rule: I suspect it was also 90 per cent, but I do not have that. I will have to confirm that, but I think it is—

MRS KIKKERT: The target has dropped because the client survey numbers dropped over the years?

Ms Rule: No. I think the target is the same.

MRS KIKKERT: The target is the same over the last five years.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mrs Kikkert, there is the explanation on page 429 around the decrease being indicative of the increased complexity in intake matters for families presenting at the CFCs. Where families require a more intensive and targeted response and further professional input—and this is a bit of speculation—that may be a circumstance where it does require a multidisciplinary response. Then there are some of the staffing challenges that Ms Chen and others have talked about in relation to the availability of our allied health staff, potentially not even in the CFC, but the capacity to be able to be referred to other services might be affecting that satisfaction rate as well. CFC staff might be doing everything right and providing really fantastic case management support, but, if they cannot actually get the person into another service, that might affect their satisfaction as well. When you have satisfaction levels at 94 and 95 per cent—and that has dropped from 96 per cent—it is pretty hard to say that it is any reflection on the Child and Family Centres.

MRS KIKKERT: That is why I was going back to my previous two questions—whether the survey calculated if it was based on client dissatisfaction with the referral process, because they could not get anyone, or it was due to staff shortages with regard to finding a social worker or somebody to deal with their issues. I can understand that.

Ms Rule: I think the survey is a much more simplistic instrument than that, which is: “Indicate your level of satisfaction with our service.” It does not go to the why, which

is quite typical of client satisfaction surveys. Results consistently in the 90s for those types of surveys in social services systems is exceptionally high.

MRS KIKKERT: Can the committee receive a copy of that survey, Ms Rule?

Ms Rule: The survey itself or the survey data?

MRS KIKKERT: The survey that was done. The survey data as well.

Ms Rule: We can provide that information for you, Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you, Ms Rule. Those are all the questions I have. Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: You did not do too badly! On behalf of the committee, we would like to thank the minister and officials for their attendance today. We also would like to thank broadcasting and Hansard staff—please take a bow—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 proof of the *Hansard*. If any members wish to put any questions on notice, please upload them to the parliament portal as soon as practical and no later than five business after the hearing. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 1.58 pm.