



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2025-2026

(Reference: [Inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2025-2026 and Appropriation
\(Office of the Legislative Assembly\) Bill 2025-2026](#))

Members:

**MR E COCKS (Chair)
MR S RATTENBURY (Deputy Chair)
MS F CARRICK
MS C TOUGH**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 22 JULY 2025

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

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.01 am

BERRY, MS ASHLEE, ACT and Capital Region Executive Director, Property Council of Australia

MACLEAN, MR HOWARD, Convenor, Greater Canberra

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to this public hearing of the Select Committee on Estimates 2025-2026 for its inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2025-2026 and Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2025-2026. The committee will today hear from a broad range of community organisations.

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

This hearing is a legal proceeding of the Assembly and has the same standing as proceedings of the Assembly itself; therefore, today's evidence attracts parliamentary privilege. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the Assembly. The hearing is being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and web-streamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used these words: "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We welcome witnesses from Greater Canberra and the Property Council of Australia. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. I know both of you have some interest in the LVC, the lease variation charge. As a proportion of the territory's own source revenue, it is being halved from the 2024-25 budget to the 2028-29 estimate, but ultimately we are looking at a situation where the LVC provides a less significant role in territory revenue. I understand the Property Council represents members who seek feasibility studies for their developments. Would it be fair to say that, despite revenue downgrades from the LVC, it still remains a pretty significant cost to industry when looking at the feasibility of residential development projects?

Ms Berry: That is absolutely a fair comment. For a long time, we have been looking at the lease variation charge and the impact that it has on development. There is no broad opposition to the principle behind the lease variation charge. It is a betterment tax to make sure that government is not in a worse position if they had sold a block of land today rather than, say, 10 years ago and allowed value uplift. What we are seeing, though, is a very different economic environment, a very different set of circumstances than when the LVC was first introduced. We have certainly seen the benefit of things like LVC remissions in the past. We saw a big uplift in incentives in development when there were some remissions on the LVC. I do not have the exact figures, but, if the committee were interested in those, I can take them on notice and provide what I can to

the committee.

The impact of the LVC at the moment is twofold. It adds to the cost of housing because the minimum of \$43,000, from a statutory charge perspective, if you were doing small developments, is ultimately added to the cost of housing. It is a minimum of \$43,000. In some suburbs, it is greater than that. That is a real disincentive for some of the missing middle developments, for things like dual occupancies and tri-occupancies, when you are paying that per dwelling. That is a big issue.

Also, across the board, it has an impact on, as you said, feasibility. When a corporate professional developer or mum and dad are redeveloping or doing something with their block of land, they need to get finance. When they go to the bank, the feedback we are getting from our members is that the LVC is the straw that breaks the camel's back, because it is pushing the feasibility to a point where a bank says, "We can't lend on that." That is problematic, and that is starting to impact on the delivery of housing across the board.

The other point on the LVC is the time at which it needs to be paid. It needs to be paid when you do your development application. There are some schemes in place to have that deferred, but that does not apply across the board. That is an issue as well: you are paying before you can actually see any benefit or reward from that.

THE CHAIR: Mr Maclean, the LVC appears in your submission as well. There seemed to be a bit of a sense of disappointment there too.

Mr Maclean: Our position in relation to the LVC is similar in that we actually support the principle of the tax. Windfall gains tax is one of the most efficient taxes you can have. We definitely support collecting money for public services through that over payroll taxes or stamp duty. It is much more efficient in that respect.

In terms of our concerns, a lot of it comes down to how the tax is formulated. It will be a lot better in terms of reducing barriers to housing if it were paid at the point of sale rather than at the point of lease variation. Part of the problem that we have is that, while the LVC is kind of a windfall gains tax associated with rezoning, it actually engages upon the point of lease variation, which means it is not associated with rezoning processes in and of themselves; it is associated with the process of varying a lease as part of development.

Because it is a unique tax, because there is no other tax like it in Australia, we actually do not have a whole lot of good academic evidence on how it works or the potential impacts on housing. One of the things we would urge the Assembly to look at is to try to engage with the evidence and look at the extent to which it potentially inhibits housing. Currently we do not know. Our broad position is that, currently, it is a very complex process. There are about 300 codified localities in the LVC act for all the different suburbs and different residential rates. In Canberra, while we have the system where every block has an assessed unimproved land value, the codified rates for the LVC do not track that land value, and that creates a situation where you could end up with an actual LVC rate which is far below the notional 75 per cent for these codified rates or potentially far above.

Our team has not looked into it under the new LVC rates under current evaluations, but, when we looked into it about two years ago, we identified cases where, when you compared the unimproved land value before variation and after variation, the LVC rate that would need to be paid on those blocks was actually over 100 per cent of the improved land value. We found a few blocks like that in Red Hill and O'Connor. That is our concern with the LVC. We support the principle, but we think that the technical implementation of this tax is cumbersome. It creates a lot of potential ambiguities. There is a lot of scope for the Assembly to look at how to reform it to make sure that we still end up with a very solid revenue stream that can fund our hospitals, our schools and our public services but it does not accidentally impair or distort housing.

MS CARRICK: Why do you think it is decreasing over time—\$38 million, \$33 million, \$28 million, \$26 million? It is dropping.

Ms Berry: Because housing has hit rock bottom in the ACT. We have development applications at such a low level, the lowest since 2005. There is no confidence in the market at the moment. Because of an increase in all costs, but ultimately because of taxes and charges like the LVC, things are not going ahead. Developers look at blocks of land, they look at projects and they do the numbers, and, at the moment, things are not stacking up, which is really concerning.

MS CARRICK: I can understand that. That might be the reality, but I am not sure why the ACT government would forecast what you are saying. I would have thought they would have forecast housing starts because they have commitments for housing.

MS CLAY: Along with Ms Carrick, I am also interested in the decrease over time. I would have expected that, if government expected more building because of the ambitious housing targets by 2030 and the up-zoning process underway, it might increase. It might not increase next year, because we all understand the pressures, but it would increase in future years. Have you had a conversation with government about why, in four years, it will be lower than it is now?

Ms Berry: I have not had a conversation with government about that. I share your curiosity as to why that is. It is almost level rather than increasing. Certainly from our perspective, we need to get more development applications in. By virtue of that, it should mean that there are more LVC applications and more payments coming in. I am not sure about that.

MS CLAY: The planning minister recently said that people can defer their LVC payments. Does your industry body have details on people's experience on that? That might be something that you could lodge on notice. I would be interested to know who it is available to and how easily people are able to do that.

Ms Berry: I am happy to take that question on notice.

MR CAIN: I think everyone agrees on the justification for liability. There is an important discussion about when it is payable. You have raised that. That is a significant burden before you get the benefit. The codification element of the LVC seems to work reasonably well. When there is a dispute, though, as you would all be aware, it is a valuation based argument, which is terribly messy. I have had that experience directly

myself. Do you think there is a better model for the calculation of the LVC other than by a valuation? Also, what are your views on when the liability should be paid?

Ms Berry: I do not have a view on valuations as such but a view on how disputes should be determined. From our perspective, ACAT is not the most efficient or well-resourced body to review those disputes. In our budget submission and previously in advocacy leading up to the election, we campaigned for the president of a body like the API being appointed to determine that valuation dispute. They are registered and accredited professional valuers who understand the competing arguments in valuations, and they have professional capabilities and independence. They have their own code of conduct and ethics that they must comply with. They could do that, and they could do it in a far more efficient manner.

One of the biggest issues for our members is the uncertainty of LVC valuations. They will get their own valuation as part of the feasibility requirements and the general process. They need to lodge that with Revenue and then Revenue will do their own assessment. That can take months, and not just one or two months; sometimes it takes over 12 months. That is problematic because it needs to happen in order for a developer to determine whether something is feasible. That is an issue. We need that part of it sped up, and ideally we would not have a tribunal like ACAT determining these sorts of matters. It should go to an independent valuer.

Mr Maclean: Our provisional view is that the LVC should be paid when the gain is actually realised—at the sale of the redeveloped property, rather than at the moment of variation of the lease. We think that would deal with a lot of the financing related problems and paying the LVC, but it would not actually reduce the amount of money that eventually comes to the Treasury; it would just delay it slightly.

In terms of how to calculate it, our view is that there are problems with the codified rates. We understand that it creates a degree of simplicity for development and a degree of certainty, and that in itself is a good thing. But there is a problem. There are so many examples where the codified rates do not make a particularly large amount of sense. There are some suburbs where the codified charge to add a third property is less than the codified charge to add a second property. There are examples where, for instance, side blocks have a much higher LVC than blocks across the street. We feel there are a lot of distortions in the current codified rate system. Our provisional view—and the reason I say “provisional” is that we do not know enough about the LVC, and more evidence will be needed because it is such a unique tax—is that we have a system where we track the unimproved value of every block, and we do that every year, because that is how we calculate rates of land tax. The LVC should be calculated on the expected increase in the unimproved value as a result of a lease variation as a percentage.

In the current complex system, we have different localities and the rates are different for how many additional dwellings you add, and that is the same, regardless of how big or how small the block is. A corner block has a lower de facto LVC rate than a smaller block. We think there are a lot of examples of how you could create a system that adds certainty for development and certainty as to how much things cost, and to do so in a less distortionary and more fair way.

MS CASTLEY: I really appreciate you explaining this. It is really clear that projects

are not feasible. We all definitely understand that we need more housing. Understanding the challenges that are faced by members that you deal with in other states and territories, is the LVC a project feasibility issue unique to the ACT or is this happening across the border?

Ms Berry: It is unique here. It is a unique tax. As Mr Maclean has said, it is something that is unique to the ACT with our leasehold system. Every state and territory has its own ambit of taxes and charges that need to go into a development, but the LVC is absolutely unique to us. We have the utility contribution charges and other things that those jurisdictions have as well, so I would say it is an additional tax that we pay.

MS CASTLEY: You touched on a couple of things, other than the LVC being realised at the time—that it comes in at the time the gain is realised. Are there any other areas that you think the committee could look at to recommend to government changes in order to make project feasibility more viable?

Mr Maclean: It is very important that, when we look at the LVC, we also look at any additional encumbrances which are placed upon the development, for things such as inclusionary zoning, because, if you are in a position where you are taxing 75 per cent of the windfall gain that exists in relation to a development, then the inclusionary zoning requirements effectively tax the same thing. You can very easily end up with over 100 per cent of the windfall gain or the increase in land value associated with an upzoning. That is not to say that there is no potential scope for inclusionary zoning, although we do have concerns. Any inclusionary zoning policy in the ACT will exist alongside an LVC encumbrance, and they are effectively taxing the same thing, which is the windfall gain from the increased value of the land.

MR RATTENBURY: In a similar vein but on a different track: the new head of the City and Environment Directorate has said he wants to improve the processing time it takes for the directorate to make decisions. What advice would you provide to Mr Pepper about how he should improve his directorate's processes?

Ms Berry: The first thing to say is we absolutely welcome that approach and that comment. I have said publicly that the first step here to fixing the issues is for the directorate to recognise that there are some roadblocks and there are some issues. So we really welcome those comments that Mr Pepper has made. I think it is really important from our perspective that the directorate and industry work together, and I am seeing that come through, which is really positive.

In terms of how they fix the system or the planning process, at the moment you need to get up to 12 approvals from some entities within government and some entities sort of alongside government—so independent authorities like Icon and Evoenergy— and we have seen the process become more and more cumbersome. Moving to the outcomes-based planning system has been great; however, our planning system is running by one set of rules and the utilities are not quite there from an outcomes-based approach. They still have very prescriptive rules about setbacks, about where pipes can and cannot go and about easements and things like that. At the moment, they are not gelling; so that is one thing that Mr Pepper and his team will need to try and address.

In terms of the process, it is just too cumbersome. There are too many steps. It is not so

much that too many people get an opinion, although that can be an issue—there needs to be one person taking charge; it is that if you need to change something to appease one entity, then you normally need to go back to all of them to get an okay and a further sign-off. The time that that takes is problematic.

The other point is that we have seen almost the attitude of, “We say no. If there is a minor problem, we just need to reject it, we say no, we email it back and we put it in the post.” It takes four to six weeks for there to be a turnaround. There is not that sense of urgency and not that desire to not just say yes—we are not asking for a tick-box exercise where everything just sails through—but, rather, if there are issues with something that is submitted, and minor issues, that someone picks up the phone and has that culture of, “We cannot approve it this way but this is why” and actually explains it through, in real time, so that minor amendments can be made. From our perspective, time is money and, the longer these projects take to get through this process, the less feasible the development becomes. Then it takes longer to deliver housing but it also means that a developer is not in as great a position to deliver the next project. That is what we are seeing here.

Mr Maclean: Adding to that—and the thing that the Assembly can do to better enable the directorate to actually deliver upon planning outcomes—we have moved to an outcomes-based system. That is a good thing. It empowers the Chief Planner to make a decision and a call that is kind of a church council-like system we have with referral entities, which involves inherently balancing many different concerns—for example, concerns related to trees, concerns related to heritage and concerns related to housing outcomes.

But, at the moment, in most cases, outside of our town centres and outside of the Kingston Foreshore, those decisions can be taken to ACAT by a third party. Then, effectively, we are in the position where those decisions can be relitigated through a new set of decision-makers which may not necessarily share the views on how to correctly balance all of these competing interests which the Chief Planner has come to. In our view, this creates a lot of chaos in the planning system. We think that that is one of the major reasons that we have seen the slowdown in the development pipeline and why developers wait to see exactly how the new system shapes out in terms of what the process is like.

We have avoided a lot of these problems over the past 10 years because we have put the majority of our new housing development in areas which are exempt from ACAT appeal; namely, in our town centres and in greenfield areas. With missing middle, we are now moving to a system where the balance of our development will now occur in existing suburbs and those who are exposed to third-party ACAT appeal. So, in terms of actually enabling certainty in the planning system and unblocking things, we think that reform to how we do third-party appeals is key.

MR RATTENBURY: Ms Berry, I appreciated your comments around culture. I think that is an important thing. Do you believe that the planning directorate has enough staff? One of the issues that I have heard over time is people saying that there is just not enough staff to process these things.

Ms Berry: I think historically that has absolutely been an issue. I do not have an opinion

one way or the other at this stage as to whether lack of staff is an issue. I have not seen that come through from the planning directorate; I have seen those comments made about other entities—about not being quick enough. At the moment, though, to be honest, with the amount of applications that are going through, the staff is probably fine. If we were to have double or triple the number of applications, then it might be a different conversation.

MS CARRICK: This is about process and consultation. We want things to move through in a more timely manner. What are your views about the level of consultation we have and whether more or less would facilitate the process? If we had more consultation would we reduce the third-party appeals? There have to be some checks and balances in the system to protect neighbours as we densify.

Ms Berry: Absolutely, there need to be the checks and balances. I have certainly received a lot of mixed feedback from my members on what their experience has been with consultation. It is varied, and so it is a difficult issue for us to strike the right balance. Ideally, we would have appropriate community consultation upfront. From my perspective, that does not mean that the developer has to do everything that the community asks for—because sometimes that is not feasible from a budget perspective but it is also not feasible from a planning and rules perspective. One of the issues that has been raised with me is that developers have done that—and done that, I would say, well—and then they are still ultimately faced with ACAT third-party appeals.

I think there needs to be some balance. There need to be some trade-offs. I am sure that there are policies and ways that this could be drafted into regulations or practice in that, if you engage in appropriate community consultation upfront and you address the concerns—and we already have the National Capital Design Review Panel for a lot of our projects; so we have those processes—you should be exempt from ACAT third-party appeals on any of those issues that are contained within that consultation.

At the moment we do not have that and it is problematic for developers because they do not necessarily see the benefits because there are no benefits in spending, say, six months on proper consultation. So I think we need to do something. We can do it better. We should do it better. If we have those discussions upfront and the community and the developer work together, then we can get better outcomes for our buildings around Canberra. We just need to have the system right.

Mr Maclean: In our view, the appropriate place for consultation is at the rule setting stage when we, as a city, decide whether a certain type of development is going to happen in a given area. A really good example of that is the ongoing missing middle reform process that is currently happening. The government is engaging widely. I am sure that this Assembly will conduct its own inquiry into those changes. That is an example of a really comprehensive in-depth consultation process which the entire community can get involved with.

But I feel that, once we as a city has decided that a given type of development should be able to go ahead, there should not be the same scope to litigate on the individual development that is proposed on a given block. One of our major concerns is that this entire process of having almost a quasi-judicial process in all planning appeals which in a no-cost jurisdiction creates a lot of incentives for people to litigate if they are

opposing systems of development, even if it is lawful, because they know it is a no-cost jurisdiction and that places a lot of costs upon the developer. I would like to emphasise that a lot of the time the developer involved here is the ACT government in the form of public housing, and those costs can be imposed by that process that discourages that kind of development regardless of if you win or lose.

MS CARRICK: We just need to make sure we protect the rights of people.

MR CAIN: Would a centralised process—I am thinking of DA applications—improve the speediness and certainty for developers and builders?

Ms Berry: To some extent, in theory, we have a centralised process at the moment with, as Mr Maclean said, with a chief planner who can make decisions. We can look to other jurisdictions like New South Wales where they have a housing taskforce and are implementing their patent book with fast-tracked DAs—reported to be getting done in 10 days—which, I would assume, would cover most of the missing middle type developments.

To my earlier point, we need that culture of how we get more housing through and how we provide more certainty for developers. When we say “developers”, that ranges from a mum and dad who have bought a block of land and are building their house, a dual occupancy or a tri occupancy, because they want to age in place and it includes government for public housing. It includes everyone. The word “developers” seems to have negative connotations. But, without developers, we might have a house but our kids will not have homes—and how do we attract more and more people to Canberra?

So we need to make the conditions for any developer right so that they can develop the homes that we need and that future Canberrans need. There is a balance that can be struck with proper consultation with the community to ensure that people’s rights are protected—absolutely—but we also need to make sure that we are not taking the rights of the people who already live in a suburb and putting them well above, for argument’s sake, the people that want to live in that suburb or want to age in place or want to change that suburb. I do not think we have the balance right at the moment, by any means, but we certainly can and we are willing to work with government to do that.

THE CHAIR: I might just actually see if we can wrap up this line, but I do want to make a quick observation. I was looking at your LinkedIn post, Ms Berry, which shows an absolutely precipitous drop-off in the number of approvals from the government. It sounds like we have an absolute confluence of disincentives for developers, both financial and the bureaucratic process as well. Is that a fair observation?

Ms Berry: Absolutely. It is, you know, the perfect storm. We have planning issues, which Mr Pepper has committed to working through, and we feel positive about that, but there is still a lot of work to be done. There is LBC as the main tax. There are other taxes and charges, but LBC is the main one, and there is ACAT. At the moment, all three of those are, I would say, the reasons why there is that very significant drop-off.

THE CHAIR: And the outcome is that we do not have enough houses?

Ms Berry: Correct.

Mr Maclean: I was just going to say that there is a human cost to all of this. I have a younger brother who is currently living on campus at ANU. He will be looking for a share house in a few years. The price of that share house, given the current pipeline issues that we have and the amount of new housing going through, will almost certainly over time rise. We are in a position where this will cause an increase in the rents in the ACT, due to this current stuff-up—not right now but further down the line, as this pipeline actually turns into a reduction in the amount of housing supply being delivered, that will follow through in rents that will hit the worst off the most.

Ms Berry: Yes.

MS CARRICK: My substantive is about the pipeline. I read your submission with interest, until I got to the end of it. While I agree with investment in large infrastructure in the city to attract economic development, tourism and that sort of thing, these huge projects take a long time to plan and they are very expensive. While the federal government might fund fifty-fifty, it still costs the ACT government hundreds of millions. And where does the ACT government get their money? Property charges from the people. So it is a bit of a vicious circle and we end up borrowing more. So I was wondering about your views on having a pipeline of projects that includes a more medium-sized government investment in schools, health facilities, recreation facilities, cultural facilities and investing in the neighbourhoods and the communities—something that can be planned and done a bit quicker to keep the pipeline moving.

Ms Berry: I agree wholeheartedly with that. We need to have a mix of infrastructure—and not just because that is what Canberra needs. If you speak to any of our local building or civil contractors, they will all be saying that we need a mix of projects to sustain our local workforce, our local skills, our local employers. That is absolutely important. From our perspective, whilst those big projects like the theatre, the convention centre, the stadium and light rail are absolutely on a wish list, at the end of the day, we clearly cannot afford all of them all at once. That has been made abundantly clear, and we accept that. But what we need then is a plan. How are we going to revitalise our city?

As Canberrans, we have a pretty high demand for services and the infrastructure that we want. Whether we can have all of these things is a matter for the government, for this budget and for the committee and the Assembly. But I do think it is important that we have a conversation about the benefit of big infrastructure, like the convention centre. For example, at the moment, the convention centre we have is too small to be able to attract the national conventions that we should be having in Canberra. So we are missing out on that economic benefit.

We need to see that detail. I think that is really important from the Assembly's perspective but also from the public's perspective. If there is detail there that says, "We need to spend X amount of hundreds of millions of dollars on a new convention centre, but here is the economic return to the territory over a certain period of time," for me, it is a no-brainer: we should do it because of that attraction. The city is struggling and, from my perspective, I can see a whole lot of benefit from doing that.

What I would recommend and ask this committee to look into are the ways that these

infrastructure projects can be funded, which is something that was not featured in the budget—to look into things like the convention centre and a stadium, looking at public-private partnerships, looking at how to get more private investment into these big-ticket infrastructure items so that the government has a way of delivering them, but not having to borrow excessively to be able to deliver the infrastructure that we need.

Mr Maclean: I would just quickly put on the record that Greater Canberra entirely supports light rail stage 2. We think that, with the hindsight of time, light rail stage 1 was probably one of the best infrastructure projects undertaken in Australia within the 2010s. The impact which it has had upon our city: it now drives nearly half of public transport patronage on Sundays and Saturdays. In addition to that, we regard it as housing infrastructure. The rezoning around light rail stage 1 delivered tens of thousands of homes, and we view that as one of the key reasons why, unlike the rest of the country, rents did not increase that much in Canberra during the immediate post-pandemic era. We view that largely as driven by the light rail stage 1 housing pipeline that was coming online at that time in particular.

Light rail stage two is critical for our city, in our view, in relation to not only future housing through the housing it could potentially unlock along the corridor but also because we cannot really upgrade the roads in the Parliamentary Triangle. As the number of employers increase in the Parliamentary Triangle from the federal government, we need light rail in order to ensure that we do not have gridlock and congestion that would otherwise be driven. We need that public transport infrastructure and we need that housing infrastructure.

We do regard it as a useful project. Yes, it is expensive, but it is a city-shaping project which will enable a full city-wide light rail network and to extend the benefits that the inner north and Gungahlin have already experienced for the rest of the city.

MS CARRICK: I would also like to stand up for all the town centres. Some of them are not thriving either and I think that, while we need that economic activity in the centre, it also needs to be distributed across Canberra.

Ms Berry: To add to that, we need strong and thriving town centres and we need a strong and thriving city. At the moment, we do not have that balance right and so we need to do more work to get that balance right.

Mr Maclean: Light rail to Tuggeranong!

THE CHAIR: We might take all of those as comments.

MS TOUGH: My question is on the missing middle reforms. The short-form consultation closed today, I believe, and the government reported this morning that the reforms are being met with broad community support. What do you see as some of the potential barriers to these reforms going ahead and actually achieving the outcomes?

Mr Maclean: The biggest barrier, we think, is to make sure that we get the RZ1 zone objectives correct. Within the hierarchy of the planning reforms that we are currently doing, there is the design guide and the technical specifications and, if there are problems with those, the government can fix them after the fact relatively easily. But

what we are doing in terms of the residential policies and subdivision policy will take another very long major plan process to fix, and we just want to make sure that the zone objectives which we currently have in the draft change to the Territory Plan actually reflects the ambition that the government wants to bring to these reforms and to make sure that they are very clear in the Assembly speaking to the directorate and saying that what is in the missing middle design guide and the kinds of typologies we have here is acceptable in every suburb in Canberra in every block.

In our view, that is the main barrier, but then also just ensuring that we end up with a system that actually works in delivering these typologies. We do have concern about ACAT. It has been noted for many years that development in RZ2 is lower than would otherwise be expected. We do think the litigation risk is quite important with that. We are just making sure there is a certainty and a pathway that allows for people to build the kind of housing that people want without there necessarily being a very long pipeline and a lot of uncertainty.

We think that those are the broad range of issues, but we should say that we think the government has mostly got it right. These are really minor issues and the reform package is being met, because it meets Canberra's expectations about what we want to do with the missing middle typologies in established urban suburbs.

Ms Berry: To follow up on that, the technical detail around the upzoning of RZ1 and RZ2 we wholeheartedly support, and we think that the government has largely got it right. There has been a lot of consultation, both from industry and community, which has been a really good approach adopted by the government. For us, the key issues are in the implementation and making sure that it is as effective as possible, and that is by government pulling all of the levers that we talked about today. That is planning, taxes obviously, and it is ACAT.

MS CLAY: The government says it has a clear plan to deliver 30,000 new homes by 2030, including a thousand public and social homes by 2030. I have now been through a series of estimates and annual reports hearings in which we look at the APS figures on approvals and new builds and we look at these targets, and then we ask the ministers and the officials, "Are we on track to meet these targets", and we keep hearing, "Yes, we are just about to turn the corner." I feel like this has been going on for a couple of years now. Do you think we are just about to turn the corner or do you think the government is at risk of failing to meet those 2030 target of 30,000 new homes and a thousand new social and public homes?

Ms Berry: I think there is a real risk that we will not hit those targets, but we can still. I would describe it as maybe we are at a T intersection at the moment—if we want to keep the corner analogy—if we can do all the right things and we can turn the right corner. Those right things are getting planning right, getting the investment settings right, getting the tax settings right and not making it difficult to deliver things like public housing—and not making it difficult to deliver housing, full stop. There are innovative ways that government could get more public, social and affordable housing delivered by the private sector through planning reforms. That is what needs to happen.

MS CLAY: You have both had a really careful look at the budget papers. Did you see anything in these budget papers that will set us up to meet the targets or do you think

we do not yet have that reform in those budget papers and that funding?

Mr Maclean: Associating myself with the earlier comments, Greater Canberra's view is that we do not have a sufficient amount of resourcing for public and social housing. The wait list is far too long and there are not sufficient resources to deal with it. More broadly to the point, part of the problem that we have in gauging whether we are going to hit the targets is that the city is also doing it tough more broadly.

At the moment, the ANU is currently going through a whole load of redundancies, and that is having an impact upon the economy within the ACT and demand for housing. At the same time, one thing that we have been trying to disentangle as an organisation is that there have been changes to APS work conditions which now allow people to work the same jobs that previously required them to be in Canberra from anywhere in the country.

We are not sure to the extent to which those demand side factors for Canberra's population growth are shaping housing demand, but we definitely do think that there is a large number of problems in terms of the ACT government's ability to deliver both private housing via this uncertainty in the planning system we have talked today and also by insufficient funding for public and social housing.

Ms Berry: There is not enough in the budget.

THE CHAIR: We have hit time; however, we can push on slightly if it comes to that. Mr Cain, I know you have been waiting all morning.

MR CAIN: I have a quick one. The Belconnen Alliance of High-Rise Apartments and I joined some media at Margaret Timpson Park recently calling for the extension of the park over the hole in the ground that has been there for a decade plus. Do either of your organisations support the expansion of the park in an increasingly densified Belconnen town centre?

Mr Maclean: Our view is very much that the current fact that there is just a hole—it is kind of like the pit from *Parks and Recreation*, in that it has just been there forever—is a terrible situation. We would go further and say that we think one of the problems that we have in our city at the moment is that the City Renewal Authority does fantastic work for Dickson and Civic and the inner north and makes for a lot of focus and a lot of effort on the public places in our urban areas, like in the inner city, and we currently do not have comparable organisations that are putting the same amount of effort into the other town centres.

We think that that is a shame and that the residents of those town centres deserve better than what they are currently getting in terms of their public realm, and that the residents of Belconnen town centre deserve, amongst other things, a school which is another thing that we support. There really needs to be more effort by the government to think about how town centres and group centres outside the inner north—because they have done a great job with Civic and with Dickson on the whole—are provided with the services and public spaces that they need.

So, while we do not have a position on whether the park should be extended per se, we

definitely think that the fact that there has just been a hole in the group in the middle of Belconnen town centre for 10 years is kind of symptomatic of broader problems effectively in how the ACT government has been engaging in the town centres outside of Civic and Dickson.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry?

Ms Berry: Only to support Mr Maclean's comments and to add that, rather than commenting on specific projects, what we need to have in all of our town centres is the appropriate mix of good, open public spaces, community facilities, schools and other infrastructure that Canberrans expect and deserve. We need to make sure that we have that available. Government should be doing everything they can to make sure those open public spaces are there, because they ultimately support development and they provide us with the way of life that we want and the facilities that we need.

MR CAIN: So yes or no on a bigger park?

Ms Berry: No comment from us.

THE CHAIR: I might just round out with a quick supplementary. It seems one of the big fears for a lot of people who have development entering into an area they have been settled in for a long time is the loss of green space and the loss of infrastructure or infrastructure that just cannot keep up. What needs to happen to make sure that we are not only looking after the people who will move into an area but also making sure we are protecting those things that are really important for the community to thrive as well?

Mr Berry: It comes down to our planning system, in essence. If we have the outcomes-based planning system, then developments that keep the public realm, keep that green space, ensure that public infrastructure—things like parks, footpaths, community facilities—are delivered as part of a development, then that should be rewarded and there should be recognition of that within the planning system. From our perspective, if you do that, then that will hopefully allay any fears from the community that they will only have housing. Whilst housing is absolutely vital and really important, we also need to have all those supporting facilities and community facilities, like commercial premises that have shops in it so people are not needing to get into their car to travel to get anything done.

So it is really important that good development is rewarded. We need to see that. That can be done in a variety of ways—with offsets for LVC if things are being delivered by the developer and with greater allowances perhaps for height or for yield and it could go higher if there are parks delivered. There are innovative ways that it can be done and we just need to explore that to deliver the best outcomes.

Mr Maclean: Just to add to that briefly: one of the main strengths of the government's missing middle reform program is it allows traditional housing in suburbs without sacrificing any green space—green space on private blocks and green space on public areas like parks. We are in a position in the ACT where there are an awful lot of schools that we had to close down for want of children. I live near the old Griffith Primary School and walk past it quite often. It currently cannot operate because there are not enough children. We are seeing a similar problem in much of Tuggeranong. There are

so many closed schools throughout the ACT. There are so many shops that ran out of customers and they have been struggling commercially. We are in a position where, if anything, in many cases we have infrastructure that needs more people in order to thrive. So there is a real benefit here. By allowing for increased population in our existing suburbs, we actually end up with more functional infrastructure rather than less.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. I think it is fair to say the number of questions and the amount of discussion is a reflection of the importance of housing for Canberra in general. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days. Ms Berry, I think you were going to provide some data from early on.

Ms Berry: Yes, I have made some notes.

THE CHAIR: Please provide those within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you very much.

KELLY, MS LISA, Chief Executive Officer, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT

SLAUGHTER, MS PRUDENCE, Chief Executive Officer, Mental Illness Education ACT

THE CHAIR: We welcome witnesses from Mental Illness Education ACT and the Mental Health Community Coalition ACT. Please note that as witnesses you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. As we are not inviting opening statements, we will proceed directly to questions, but I wanted to start out by thanking you for your patience while we got through to this session. I know I mentioned that the last session was important, but this is an extremely important one as well, and I know that there is lots of interest in it.

From my perspective, mental health has been something I have been passionate about for a long time, and, in particular, the importance of building connection between services for the people at the other end. I have always talked about a seamless experience—so no matter where you turn up, you can get the mental health care you need and deserve. I am really interested in both of your perspectives around how the ACT's system is working now and whether you see anything tangible in this budget that is going to get that connection working better. Ms Slaughter, did you want to—

Ms Slaughter: I will start by saying that at Mental Illness Education ACT we very much work in the mental health prevention and promotion space, very much supporting the ACT government's release of the ACT-ing Upstream to really swing the dial back to mental health prevention and promotion, and it is that connection and starting so young, with students in grade 3, to increase mental health literacy and to increase help-seeking and stigma reduction. We believe that that spend, and the spending that we have received at MIEACT for multi-year funding to recognise our experience and our commitment to prevention and promotion, will return in investment for every \$1 spent up to \$3.05 in that space. That is going to swing the dial back and eventually reduce the burden on acute spending in mental health.

THE CHAIR: Do you see any connection through from that in terms of tangible, human connection? Is there any opportunity in that work to identify people early and intervene early as well?

Ms Slaughter: I think the power of MIEACT's programs are that we increase help-seeking so that individuals have the confidence to seek help and to reach out and build connection within their own peer groups, within their own friends, and with parents and carers. It is that self-identification and that connection that can be really, when it is driven by the individual and by the student so young—

THE CHAIR: Yes, it puts the power back into their hands.

Ms Slaughter: Yes, and it is resilience, and it builds strength into the future and changes the paradigm long-term.

THE CHAIR: Ms Kelly, any thoughts from your end?

Ms Kelly: I am going to start by talking about how complex mental health is. I think we keep looking for this singular solution to what is essentially one of the world's most complex problems and issues. It is affected by such a diverse range of factors that trying to identify one solution is never going to work, so that is the first thing I am going to talk about and state. I also think that it is really important that, when we are talking about mental health, we actually are clear and articulate exactly what we are talking about. Are we talking about people's wellbeing and living in a community, in a town, in a space where people are nurtured and supported to have good health and good wellbeing that is preventative of illness and disease, both as a mental health illness and disease or as physical illness and disease? Or are we talking about people with diagnosed, enduring mental illness who live in our community who have a high service need? I think that they are two very different ends of the spectrum, and we often just talk about mental health and see it as one whole bucket and it is not; or we are talking about one thing and everyone else is talking about something else.

So when you are talk about, "What is the joined-up service system?" my response is, "At what end of that spectrum are we talking about?" Do we have a relatively good, joined-up system at an acute end for somebody who is presenting with an acute illness at that moment in time that results in a need for safety? I would say yes. Yes, in terms of people being able to present at emergency, go into an acute bed, get the clinical support they need, be supported back into community—that is a very well-joined-up system.

At the more community end, where the joined-up component falls down is in the demand for service. What we have seen is increased demand on service: increased numbers of people coming to services, increased numbers of people needing support and services that are responding by putting all of their funding and energy into frontline staff, as a result, to manage the distress that is walking in the door. And when that happens you lose the ability to go to meetings; you lose the ability to have the time to do good referrals and to walk someone from one service to another and to connect them up to a community group to actually address the psychosocial issues that are going on for that person. So the lack of joined-up-ness is not through fault of the service system. It is through the demand that has increased on that service system and a lack of funding increase to meet the demand and that allows for intensive work with complex consumers.

THE CHAIR: It sounds like when everyone is under pressure in a service you lose the capacity to deliver that person-centred care in terms of that whole-of-person connecting up with what else they may need.

Ms Kelly: I think I would articulate it slightly differently. When there is demand on service, the focus of the service goes into the individual people. To do joined-up, integrated, collaborative care requires relationship-building. It requires engagement between organisations. It requires shared protocols. It requires additional work and effort on behalf of the service systems to work in a collaborative way. The funding for that has disappeared. So it is not about the work to the individual client. I think the members I represent and the sector I represent does phenomenal work with individual people. They never compromise that. It is the other things that get compromised that then mean the service system is not joined up.

MS CASTLEY: You have talked about the joined-up services and what people are sacrificing, but I am wondering if you would talk more about the challenges that we are facing and how we are placed for the future. What are your concerns looking forward, and what are you worried about?

Ms Kelly: I worry nightly, at the moment, around psychosocial needs and the complete “unmet-ness”, for want of a better word, of psychosocial needs. We keep investing in acute, and we keep throwing more and more resources into acute because it is the loudest. That is never ever going to stop if we are not investing upstream—if we are not putting work into prevention and early intervention, and if we are not ensuring people have good social determinants. If you do not have a house, and you are not safe, and you do not have green space—just coming off the back of your last session—and you do not have meaningful engagement in life, and you do not feel like you are part of the community, you are not going to be well.

We keep talking about mental health and the solution being in more mental health services, and I say, “No, the solution is upstream.” The solution is in overcoming loneliness, in housing and safety, in meaningful engagement in life and food, and all of those things, and then in doing early intervention and prevention for people who have a propensity to a mental illness or who are facing a life challenge. We all have life challenges. We need a network and a village and a community around us to support us in that life challenge so that we do not end up in the health system at the end of it.

MS CASTLEY: And to the budget—you did mention the \$17.1 million spending on mental health this year, and it is heading up to \$18.6 million in 2028-29, but that is not enough to keep up with inflation. So I would say the government has not budgeted enough to maintain the current level of mental health services, and I am just wondering what your thoughts are on that. Is this good enough? What would you like to see?

Ms Kelly: It is never going to be good enough to me. If you are going to ask me, “Is there enough money there?” my answer is always going to be “no”. But I think you are right: we have not kept up with inflation, but, also, I think we have recognised but have not kept the funding to respond to the alarming increasing numbers of people who are having poor mental health or are presenting with mental illness. It is endemic at the moment—the rates of people coming into services that are really struggling, particularly with things like anxiety and depression and loneliness. It is just beyond—

We are not keeping up with inflation. I know the community sector will tell you that the CPI index is at least 2.5 per cent lower than it needs to be—that we are not able to cover the increasing costs of superannuation, increasing long service leave, index levies, increasing insurance costs. So, yes, that is having significant pressure on the community sector to deliver. Do we need a solid, big, massive investment? Absolutely we do, but it needs to be at both ends. It needs to be both at acute and at community. It cannot just be all going to acute all the time.

MS CASTLEY: No, I understand. Thanks.

MR EMERSON: On the upstream investment—Victoria has introduced an early intervention investment framework where they are requiring areas to also look at cost

savings in other areas. Do you see this as a gap? I know you mentioned all the things that are upstream that basically sit outside of health as a portfolio. Is that something you would like to see changed in the ACT so that we look at where the savings are across portfolios?

Ms Kelly: Yes. I would like to see it in the ACT, but I think it also needs to be federal. The national agreement on mental health and suicide prevention, which the ACT is a party to, needs to actually start to really look at how to do cross-portfolio work here. We know education, for example, is a massive influence on young people's mental health, yet we see the education portfolio often say, "Well, that is a mental health issue, and it needs to come out of mental health," rather than saying, "Actually, the way in which education works will influence mental health and the outcomes for young people." So, yes, at the ACT level, but I think it also needs to be at the national level where we are saying, "This needs to be a cross-portfolio, cross-government responsibility." We cannot keep saying that homelessness is a mental health issue. Mental illness occurs because of homelessness, so we need to be able to say in our housing sector, "What are we doing to ensure that every Canberran has housing?" And the benefit of that is not just in a property but in people not ending up in acute mental health care. Yes, would be my short answer.

MR EMERSON: Yes, which you were touching on with the cost savings you already mentioned.

Ms Slaughter: Yes, and I appreciate the fact that the ACT is unique. We have a dynamic position, where we can set the trend and learn from Victoria and from the federal position as well. With over 43 per cent of all employees reflecting mental health concerns, it is something that has to be a community-wide response. It has to be in all workplaces. It has to be in the ACT; it has to be federally. But we can learn, and we can also take our own learnings from the ACT from the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and start to spend—and we can see the incredible spend in the acute space that must be considered—and, at the same time, spend more upstream. We have to change that paradigm and start to spend more upstream and fund the trusted programs that are evidence-based that we know build stronger, more resilient workplaces and individuals.

THE CHAIR: Ms Carrick?

MS CARRICK: Would more holistic planning—proper town planning that considers the people and their needs in their neighbourhoods—help with giving people a sense of belonging to their communities? If we can draw them in, they have a destination and places they want to be in their community.

Ms Kelly: Yes, I think that would. I also think we go around in cycles. When I started work in this sector, the emphasis was on community development. It was on employing people who worked with community to develop community—who created the playgroups, who ensured that there was a mums group, who started the walk groups. We see that starting to happen a little bit again, but community often needs a protagonist to start it and needs government to invest in community development and having neighbourhood centres and having places for people to gather and create community.

I think sometimes government says, “We want to foster that,” but we then expect the community to do it themselves, and yet we know that most of us as adults will not do that unless somebody starts it. So I think we need to have some investment in community development. We need some investment in navigators. We need some investment in a front door entry spot in community, where people can come in and say, “Hey, I need some help.”

MS CARRICK: Yes, they need places to go.

Ms Slaughter: Yes, absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Mr Rattenbury?

Mr Rattenbury: In this budget we have seen the ACT government decide not to invest in the second Safe Haven service, which was due to be placed at the Canberra Hospital. I am interested in your views on what impact this will have on the community and particularly on emergency department presentations, given that it is designed to be an early intervention approach.

Ms Kelly: I think we needed to ensure that the Safe Haven at Belconnen had adequate funding to operate, but it should not have been, I do not believe, at the expense of the one at the hospital. I think the two of them serve two very different purposes. For those of you who may not know what a Safe Haven is, a Safe Haven is a space where people who are feeling escalated can go, and it is a safe space to engage in de-escalation techniques. It is often run by peer workers, supported by clinical staff. The point of it being at a hospital is that it acts as a diversion from emergency. Quite often when people with a mental illness or a mental health episode are feeling distressed, they do not know where else to go. They might not have anywhere else to go. They turn up at emergency. Emergency is not actually equipped and is not the right place for people to be. Emergency is about providing emergency care or an admission. A Safe Haven located on a hospital ground provides a secondary space for people to go and to de-escalate in a safe way and to be supported by their community to do so.

More than that, though, for me, what a Safe Haven at a hospital does is provides parents of younger people, who often will have their first presentation during a mental health episode at a hospital, with a place they can access on hospital grounds. It is hard enough to get your 15-year-old to go to hospital to start with, let alone then to say, “Now you need to go 20 minutes down the road to somewhere else.” A Safe Haven on the grounds allows that parent to take that child to that space. They will be directed from emergency to that space, and that organisation can then support them to access the services that they might need longer term. We are very strongly in support of needing a Safe Haven on hospital grounds.

Ms Slaughter: It would not be in MIEACT’s position in that case. We are much more in the service prevention and promotion space.

MR RATTENBURY: And did you have any consultation from the ACT government before this decision was taken to defer the hospital onsite?

Ms Kelly: I am in my brain going back through the order of things. We were aware of

it. We had provided a view to the minister on it.

MR RATTENBURY: Okay.

Ms Kelly: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Ms Carrick?

MS CARRICK: I appreciate the need for a Safe Haven in the hospital grounds. The Belconnen one is in the community, so I am wondering if having one on the south side in the community—like at the Woden Town Centre, maybe not as an alternative to the hospital one but as a place in the community like the Belconnen one—would be a handy thing to have?

Ms Kelly: The way I look at it is to think about people's help-seeking behaviours—they need to know that the Belconnen Safe Haven exists. To be able to access it, they need to know it is there, which means they need to actually already be hooked into a service system or a space that tells them that that service is there. So if we duplicate it in each of the town centres, the same thing happens. They need to actually already know it exists to be able to use it.

The beauty of it being on the hospital grounds is that, for first-time help seekers, they get access to that service, and they get picked up at the point at which they are asking for help in the space in which they are asking for help and connected into the right service systems for them from that point forward. I think we forget sometimes that the average Canberran who has not experienced anything like this before will turn up at the hospital in most cases, for most things, when they feel like it is an emergency. They do not know what the rest of the service system is. They do not even know what to start looking for, so they often will turn up to hospital as their point of reference for what to do next. So that is the value of it on the hospital grounds as opposed to in the community. I think there is a need for both.

MS CARRICK: Yes, a value for both of them.

Ms Kelly: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Did you have a substantive question?

MS CARRICK: My substantive question is around the commissioning process and the foundational support. How are we progressing with the commissioning, and how are we progressing with working out what the gaps are in the foundational support?

Ms Kelly: I might take them as two separate issues. The sector has provided feedback on the strategic investment plan and we are waiting for the government response to that feedback and the finalisation of that plan. One of the things that the Mental Health Community Coalition has been asking for and talking about is that we need to look at what the procurement process is in commissioning. We have spent a lot of time thinking about the commissioning process up to procurement, where we have done lots of co-design and development, but we continue to use the same procurement process that we have used for years. We are procuring human services as though they were buildings

or as though they were products. The mechanisms that the government uses to procure a build or to procure a cleaning service or to procure toilet paper work. They do not work when you are talking about procuring human services. They do not take into account the organisational infrastructure we need and that we need to maintain as a core fundamental component of a community that is healthy and well. Instead, it procures us against each other in a constant battle for more money. It does not actually allow us to build roots.

We just talked about: “How do I know about Safe Haven?” I know about Safe Haven because has been operating for years. It sits in Belconnen. Everyone knows it is there. That has gone out to commissioning. It is now at Weston. It is run by a different organisation and it is called a different name, and we now have to rebuild those roots again. We are asking to stop and look at procurement and how procurement works when we are talking about people, human services and outcomes that allow us to spend the time to network and connect—outcomes that allow us to think about what we are achieving for people in the end and how we value that in a process that ensures financial equity, which is effectively what procurement is. That is where we are with commissioning.

In terms of foundational supports, that is a big issue around agreements regarding funding between the federal government and the states and territories—around who is funding what and what that looks like. In terms of understanding our met need, I am going to separate foundational supports from the physical and cognitive disability space and the mental illness component. A significant report has been done on what the unmet psychosocial needs are across Australia and what we need to do to meet that unmet need. We know that the need exists. The federal and state territory ministers acknowledge the unmet need. The report was put down nearly 12 months ago and we are still waiting for a solution to the funding at the federal and state and territory levels in order to start actually addressing that unmet need.

MS CASTLEY: What was that report?

Ms Kelly: It is the unmet psychosocial needs report. I am pretty sure that is the title of it.

Ms Slaughter: MIEACT has continued to receive annualised grants for our school based programs since 2017-18. While we celebrate and are very honoured to partner in a four-year grant for the year 9 Youth Aware of Mental Health, we continue to support the commissioning process. While the draft strategic investment plan is showing signs of moving forward—a very slow-moving train—I echo the need to put some scaffolding around procurement. While we look at different tranches and putting youth and young people programs up to open tender, I think there will have to be guidelines on how we will value trusted partners—evidence based, evidence informed and from the ACT. That is something that we have reflected on in our considerations.

THE CHAIR: I will make a quick observation. It seems like the funding cycles and the funding process have been extraordinarily disruptive alongside the disruption that the commissioning process brings. That is what I hear across a bunch of organisations. Is that your observation as well?

Ms Kelly: Yes; it is. We need to think about how long contracts sit historically. The disruption has been because of delays that have kept occurring to the commissioning process. It is a bit of a catch-22 for me. We need to get the commissioning right, but, when we cannot do that, we end up delaying contracts, which then causes greater uncertainty and we keep rolling around in circles. In reality, though, three- to five-year contracts to build relationships and build solid service for people who are incredibly vulnerable is not long enough. It is part of our argument around needing to look at the entire procurement process. A 12-month contract to build a building makes sense. The costs do not change much in those 12 months. You have a product design at the start and you end up with a product at the end.

THE CHAIR: Organisations and people are different.

Ms Kelly: Absolutely, yet we keep procuring them in the same way.

MR EMERSON: Regarding that report, *Analysis of unmet need for psychosocial supports*, there are 4,000 people in the ACT with severe unmet psychosocial needs and 4,000 with moderate unmet needs. Is there anything in this budget which indicates a change in program delivery to address those needs?

Ms Kelly: No.

MS TOUGH: I am interested in the YAM program, Ms Slaughter. It has been running for a few years and it has received further funding in this year's budget. What response do you get from the students and the schools who participate in it? And what benefits do you see this having for the community in the long term?

Ms Slaughter: Thank you for the question. We have been delivering YAM since 2019 as the custodians of Youth Aware of Mental Health. It comes out of the mental health and mind program in Sweden. The nature of the four-year funding to take it off annualised grants shows trust in MIEACT and the knowledge base. The educators that deliver it deliver it with authenticity; they deliver it with compassion and empathy. They take the evidence base from the Swedish model but contextualised in Canberra. We go to all schools in the ACT, to year 9. There are no teachers in the room, so it creates a different safe environment. With help seeking and role playing, they get the strategies and the processes that can support them for a more mentally healthy and resilient future, particularly when combined with the wider MIEACT school programs. We have stress programs that work from grade 7 to grade 8, and then we bring in our lived experience programs that echo the voice of lived experience to reduce stigma as well.

All of our programs are enforced by the Do No Harm communication framework. That is echoed in our YAM school programs. All of our YAM educators come. We do it very specifically in MIEACT. They receive the Do No Harm communication training so that they can create safe spaces in the classrooms—as you can imagine, the 13- to 14-year-old age group can be quite exciting—but we also give them facilitation and behaviour management training. It really amplifies the power of YAM. In the way that it is chosen and the way that the evidence informs it, we can see the longitudinal impact in six to 12 months. We look forward to building more connection and direct connection with the mental health and mind program so we can really amplify that program into the future.

MS TOUGH: Thank you. It sounds like a great program.

MS CARRICK: Did you get the funding for it that you wanted?

Ms Slaughter: We have received official word that it will be four-year funding, multi-year funding, which we are quite delighted by. In the same breath, I look forward to working with the commissioning process for the school based programs, from grade 3 to grade 12—we have it for grade 9, and that is still on six-monthly funding at the moment—in line with commissioning and the amplification of Do No Harm, which I believe has to go into the Legislative Assembly as well as all other workplaces, because it really creates a safe space for communication. It can sit alongside Compassionate Foundations. It is a different way that leaders and managers in workplaces can work.

MS CASTLEY: Sticking with MIEACT, your budget submission was for \$1.78 million, and we just chatted about the YAM program and that you did get some funding. Were you successful in that full amount?

Ms Slaughter: I am yet to be informed as to final funding.

MS CASTLEY: That is what you are waiting for?

Ms Slaughter: Yes. I also understand there are some changes in the contractual relationship. There is a six-month extension as we work through it with the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and look to a tighter relationship with the mental health and mind program out of Sweden.

MS CARRICK: Regarding all the different community organisations, in the budget papers is there transparency around how much they are getting? You can see how much arts are getting and you can see how much the sporting organisations are getting, but I am not sure where I find it for the community organisations.

Ms Kelly: You would need to understand what funding program the agency is funded under, and then you would only ever see the budget amount for the entire funding program, unless a particular project is getting funding through the budget as a particular item.

Ms Slaughter: That would be the six pre-election promises that were released separately to the budget, including YAM, as well as work in various other programs. They are represented differently.

MS CARRICK: Thank you.

MR EMERSON: This goes to all we have been discussing: investment upstream. In 2020, the government introduced the ACT Wellbeing Framework. Since the introduction of the framework, the number of Canberrans reporting very good or excellent mental health has decreased. Young people in particular continue to report low levels of good mental health. Do you think the framework in its current form and as it is being applied is changing government decision-making?

Ms Slaughter: It is not clear or evident that it is. There is a lack of clarity as to how the Wellbeing Framework is influencing decisions that are made in government. I am aware that a business case for a budget requires addressing the Wellbeing Framework, but that has never been very clear to me. How is that budget measure directly implementing it, what happens when it does not, and where is the accountability if it is not actually influencing or changing an outcome factor?

MR EMERSON: You are not aware of anything being blocked in a budget process because it did not meet the—

Ms Kelly: I have not seen it reflected in decisions. I know that 12 principles are echoed across the whole of government, but seeing a tangible advocacy voice in all government decisions is something we would welcome.

MR EMERSON: According to the wellbeing dashboard, in 2022, 53.6 per cent of men reported very good or excellent mental health compared to 44.1 per cent of women. There is a significant gap. What do you see as contributing factors towards this gap? Are there changes in government decision-making processes that could help address it? It is a pretty broad question.

Ms Kelly: It is a very broad question. I am debating in my mind whether to answer from my gut instinct versus what the research response to that is.

MR EMERSON: You can give me a gut response and then a mind one.

Ms Kelly: I will start with the gut response. You would have to consider that males and females look at wellbeing and their mental health in very different ways. Doing a straight comparison of one versus the other—does that mean one has worse mental wellbeing than the other—is difficult. We address it in a different way. We are not addressing the community interventions that help people feel well and connected and able to manage day-to-day stresses and pressures. We need to consider stuff like: “What happens if I can’t find a park in the morning, and how does that impact how I feel about myself that day and the best way I approach the day?”—the compounding factors that happen around all of that sort of stuff. Generally, people feel more rushed, pressured, anxious and concerned, and there is the cost of living and making decisions day in, day out. Often those decisions fall on women. It is making life incredibly stressful for people, and that generally makes your sense of wellbeing feel less than it has been in the past.

I am going to go back to the very first statement I made. It is a really complex problem. Do I think we are doing enough to address it? No. But, if you said to me, “You can have an open cheque. What would you do?” I would really struggle to answer, because some of this is about the absolute fabric of who we are, and it is bigger than government. If I had a magic wand, it would be about: how do we, as a community, actually come back to valuing community, valuing being nice to each other, being caring to each other, being empathetic to each other and being gentle with each other? I am not sure you can buy that, but it takes leadership. It takes all of us to say, “This is the Canberra we want, and this is how we are going to invest in getting it.”

Ms Slaughter: You have to enable it.

Ms Kelly: You need to enable it.

Ms Slaughter: You have to model it and lead it.

THE CHAIR: I am going to follow that up with a bit of a challenging question. We have spoken a lot today about the increasing demand on mental health services and the importance of the preventive work. I do not think there has ever been a time when Australia generally, including the ACT, has invested more in mental health—into both services and mental health prevention—but, at the same time, we are still seeing an extraordinarily high rate of demand for mental health services. How do you marry those two things? What is not working? What needs to be different so that we can build resilience so that we are not ending up with people in mental health services, given there has been such a big emphasis over the past decade?

Ms Slaughter: I am happy to start. We work in schools, and we start when people are very young. We are seeing that the young people that we work with have a higher prevalence. They are seeing a lot more in the world today and they have a high level of mental health literacy. We are bringing our programs to younger people because they are speaking more fluently, because of that investment in mental health and literacy. At the same time, they are not learning resilience. They are not learning about the connections—the nature of social media and everything that comes between. All of that means that we have to plant the seeds of literacy, coping and stress reduction, and we have to give young people those tools very early because we are exposing them to a much bigger and more diverse world that will set them up with more challenges every day. We are very cognisant of that in the ACT. We see it every day, but we also need to start investing in that space even more because of the nature of the world today.

Ms Kelly: I have been playing this game for a couple of decades, and, despite investments in a range of things, we have not necessarily seen significant change in things. It makes you start to ponder: what are we doing?

THE CHAIR: I have spent a while on it myself.

Ms Kelly: I sometimes wonder: are we valuing the right things as a community? We can keep pouring money into services. We will always need to put money into services and have a service response, but, until we start to crack the code on how we judge our value, our success, our happiness and people's wellbeing, as opposed to our economic status and what our bottom line is, then we are just going to be on the same merry-go-round. We need to start saying that what we actually want is a Canberra that is not judged on its economic prowess but how happy and well its people are. What we want is a Canberra that values every citizen and demonstrates that value in the way we treat our most vulnerable, where people have a meaningful life, regardless of what their job title is or how much income they raise—that they have meaning in their life and they have purpose in their life, and that they are loved and cherished by someone. Those are fundamentally the things that keep us well and healthy, yet we continue to work in economic models and value economic models. It is a hard question in this room because your drive is going to be economics, but I do wonder about your drive as leaders, in terms of saying, "Where is the leadership?" Where is the statement from government

around: “This is what we value about our Canberra, this is what we want for Canberra citizens, and this is how we are going to show it”?

THE CHAIR: It sounds like something needs to change to actually get to that sort of—

Ms Slaughter: That is a pretty brave and systemic-wide approach, and it will take real courage from all concerned in that space, because it is really changing how we think about the value of people.

Ms Kelly: I work out of the Griffin Centre now—it is the first time I have worked in a city for a long time—and I am struck daily by the level of vulnerability that sits at the doorstep of my office every day. How is it that we can say, “Canberra is a human rights jurisdiction; Canberra values its citizens; we are in the most liveable city in the world,” when I am looking at sheer vulnerability in growing numbers every day sitting at my doorstep? How do we get people who should be happy happy? Let’s make the people who are our most vulnerable safe, cared for and looked after.

Ms Slaughter: We need to listen to the voiceless in that space. That happens every day in the Griffin Centre, but also all of Canberra. That is something that we can really work on in Canberra.

THE CHAIR: On that note, I should probably go back to my script. We have gone a little bit over time. Thank you very much. As I said at the outset, it is an important discussion. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your attendance today. 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*.

Ms Kelly: No problem.

Ms Slaughter: Thanks for the invitation. I appreciate it.

Hearing suspended from 10.34 to 10.46 am.

PROWSE, MRS WENDY, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service

THE CHAIR: We welcome our witness from the ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service. Please note that as a witness you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will proceed directly to questions. Disability, like health, is one of those areas that has complex interactions between the commonwealth and the states, obviously. We are in a bit of a state of flux around foundational supports and I really want to understand your perspective on what is going to happen through that transition. What is the impact going to be in the ACT, and on the people on the ground?

Mrs Prowse: By not having foundational supports or if we eventually get them?

THE CHAIR: Well, I guess the impact of the uncertainty at the moment and the impact if we eventually get them as well.

Mrs Prowse: So I guess we have been in uncertainty for over 10 years. Foundational supports, called by lots of different names, have been promised for a very long time. I think they are absolutely fundamental to having a good healthy community and citizenship across the board—for people with disability that are eligible for the NDIS as well as those that are not; for people within the aged care system that do not want to be part of My Aged Care; I think for all members of the community—having foundational supports that are there to provide basic services.

They have been missing for a very long time. We have seen services pull back since the NDIS. I think we all came with the best of intent around what that was going to be and I think, if nothing else, through that and COVID, we have seen the greatest number of complexities, challenges and hardships from people; a real sense of hopelessness to be quite frank. It is extremely distressing and it is extremely distressing for my staff as much as it is for the people who we try and support every day.

This financial year, we have had a 22 per cent increase in requests for individual advocacy and a nine per cent increase in advocacy hours. So we have been doing 18,500 hours of advocacy, supporting 1,700 people and over 3,000 cases in the last financial year. That is very much looking for supports often for people that are not able to access them, or even services that are promised that people still cannot get.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any concerns with the transfer of responsibility around foundational supports to the ACT?

Mrs Prowse: I think our greatest challenge is the fact that we are the ACT, but we are also the capital region. How do we make sure that people, regardless of whether they live in our surrounding community, are able to get good access and quality services, and that we do not have a “them and us” process? I think often people are moving outside of the ACT to live because it is their only chance of affordability, but then they

cannot get transport to services, and then they cannot get access to services. I think that is the biggest challenge, how we build stronger relationships with New South Wales—they are obviously paying their fair share in all of this—but we cannot have an us and them divide. I think that is just not workable for anyone.

MISS NUTTALL: In terms of foundational supports, have you found that with cuts to the NDIS there have been services previously provided by the NDIS that your clients were relying on that, despite perhaps reassurance from the federal government that there would be transitions, there just is not anything in place of the service that they have been cut for and they are no longer funded for?

Mrs Prowse: Yes, absolutely, but I would say they are not actually foundational supports always. These are some of the basics, like people having a wheelchair.

MISS NUTTALL: Wow.

Mrs Prowse: So we are seeing people's plans be drawn back, pulled apart. They cannot get the basic services that they need, or even though they have very much a disability that is lifelong and permanent, the NDIS is constantly asking them to go back for assessment after assessment to again demonstrate their disability. It is just criminal. So we have not even got to the point of what foundational supports look like in this space. We are just trying to help people actually just get their basics around what they should be getting in a plan, and that is being pulled back time and time again because they have hit their—well, they are making their quota of the eight per cent. They are not actually looking at what the impact of that is. They are spending all their money on lawyers' fees, as we do, trying to support people to actually get the supports that they need, which are their basic rights. Eventually they get them but the lawyers are getting rich and the people are being distressed in the process.

MS CARRICK: With the foundational support, with what the NDIS will no longer do and what is coming back to the states, in Canberra, in that the gap, what would be the top few things that are difficult for people to access?

Mrs Prowse: I can just tell you across the board, and we can call it foundational supports, but I would like to say it is foundational supports for everyone. It is very much around domestic assistance, personal care, gardening, transport and community engagement. It is what you would fundamentally call basic decent living. We have people that are lucky if they can get a shower a week. So you know, just the basic fundamentals people cannot get.

Look, I do not want the ACT government to have to pay for something that the federal government potentially should, but at the moment we are in a crisis point for people. I think until the ACT government steps up and helps the community deliver these types of services and helps us collect the right data so that you can then go back to the federal government and hold them to account—but there needs to be a solid investment in this. Part of this is not rocket science, but it also needs to be iterative. We need to be doing this with people with disability, people with mental ill health and older people, to really understand what is it that they want today, but also what they might want in the future.

MR EMERSON: On foundational supports, I have heard about a \$90 million provision

over five years for foundational supports, but that is not in the budget. I do not think it is in the budget papers themselves. Is that a kind of assurance that has been provided by the government? Can you explain that? I am sorry if this came up before I got down here.

Mrs Prowse: In all honesty, I am a very small not-for-profit organisation that has very little resources, as in zero, to actually do the deep dive on the budget that I would have liked to have done. So fundamentally, I go along to peak bodies to try and get my sense of that. I scanned through some things which I found interesting that I am happy to share with you if you would like to know this, other than foundational supports. But all I can say is, at this point in time, there is a lot of talk, and there has been a lot of talk, about what we need to do but the wheels spin and there is no action.

I think there is good intent but it has come to a time where the rubber has hit the road and we are seeing more and more people being disadvantaged and in greater crisis because there are not those long-term supports. CATS, for example, can do a great support for up to six months, but it will not help anyone that needs those long-term supports. Basically if we could even expand on that for three years, it would give us a really great starting point from where we can start collecting data, and that is helping people across all age groups.

MR EMERSON: Do you have any sense of whether that figure—and this is going to be a hard one to answer because we do not know what the gaps are, but in terms of this promise—whether that figure is close to sufficient, noting that is from the ACT government. I think it is going to be matched by the commonwealth. I am not sure. Do you have any sense of a general ballpark?

Mrs Prowse: The only thing I can think of is that we had an opinion or an assumption around what was going to be needed around the NDIS and we were so wrong. So I think all we can do is start with what we can afford right now because at least it is something. Let us get started; let us do something; let us just make sure we can make it iterative, have that really honest transparent approach around what is going on; and then all we can do is prioritise because there is never going to be enough money. My sense is there is going to be good community will around this. There are organisations that are really quite capable of doing many of these supports. We could start very shortly if there was a will.

MS BARRY: We have heard concerns from the community that many small organisations are going to be pushed out of the market. So by the time foundational supports roll through, all of the small local organisations are probably gone anyway. Is there anything you have seen in the budget that goes to addressing that position?

Mrs Prowse: Look, once again, I have not had the ability nor do I have the capacity to be able to do any of that deep dive, but all I know from the committees that I sit on across the nation is that there are so many small organisations that are struggling with this every day, living hand-to-mouth, and the cost. We are businesses. We might be not-for-profit, but we are for-purpose businesses and we are required to pay insurance like every other business, workers' comp, we need to pay our staff appropriately, we need to look after their wellbeing, we need to give them professional development, we are required to do training.

Then we have bureaucratic systems like Secure Local Jobs that many of us have to go through, which was built for the construction industry. However, yet here we are; not-for-profit organisations having to go through a legal process, but where would we ever employ people outside of our local region to work for our organisations? So we get caught in the trap, often, of these types of systems.

The portable long service scheme is one thing I did have a look at in the budget. The only industry in there that is making a surplus is the community sector. Construction has a deficit. I would love for government to do a deep dive on the portable long service scheme to better find out what is happening in that space. What is the evaluation: has it actually kept people within the industry? Or are they just making money that they are investing that is potentially going to other industries? How do we quarantine our own money for our own staff? Because if that goes, if that is not viable, then what does that mean for all the people that are working in the community sector that potentially are going to want long service leave in the future? The fact is, once again, when we talk about cash flow, we are paying into the long service scheme. We potentially get nothing out of it. I totally agree that it is great for workers. It is just not healthy for business.

MR RATTENBURY: Can you give us a bit of insight into the experience of people with a disability in the housing market and how they navigate that, particularly in the rental space, and whether there is anything this committee should be bearing in mind that might improve that situation?

Mrs Prowse: If we are talking about private rental, they cannot afford it or it is not accessible housing for them anyway, so they generally do not go down that path. In the end, they contact ADACAS looking for individual advocacy to get support, which part of is communication matters with housing managers or the housing department not even returning calls. We need to go out and meet with them often. There is not enough social housing or public housing for people.

We collect what we call our defined issues, and both for people with disability and people with mental health, it is one of the key main defined issues of why people come and seek our support. The challenge is, unfortunately, sometimes people get upset with us because we will help them to a certain point, but then they are on a waitlist for 10 years and we cannot keep people on our books for 10 years. We say to them, "Please come back if you need some more help or you hit a roadblock." It is just an absolute cycle where people are not getting the services that they need.

MR RATTENBURY: That is basically because, if I summarise that, essentially the only housing they can afford is public housing, and there is just not enough and the waitlist is too long.

Mrs Prowse: Correct. Even for those that potentially are working, there is not enough accessible homes being built and as much as we talk about the missing middle and we want different types, we need universal design across the board. We need universal design and, as best as possible, where we have the topography, where it is like a flat dwelling, we need to have caveats in place that they are accessible just for people with disability and people that are aging, to make sure they can access those homes. The biggest challenge is then when we build all these other homes, if you are a person with

disability or an older person, you cannot visit family or friends. So we need to have that universal design mandated across the board.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned that ADACAS does a lot of advocacy work for people looking for housing, looking to get onto the public housing list. Is that the best use of resources? If that was not a problem, would there be other things that you could be doing?

Mrs Prowse: Absolutely. So we see that housing is a massive issue, the health system is a massive issue, the justice system is a massive issue and education is a massive issue. So across the board—and then we have the NDIS. So we just try and spread ourselves as best as we can. We triage and generally that is around child protection matters. So often we will get a call saying if we cannot be there to support someone, someone is going to lose their child—if we cannot be there in an hour, someone is going to lose their child. So we obviously drop everything and go.

We get asked to go to court appearances. We are often the translator between the lawyers and the person with disability to be able to support them through those matters. Then we see matters like supported decision-making. The government changed the legislation so there would not be guardianship orders, but in fact nothing has really been enacted in that. We are seeing the PTG where there is no declining trend around a reduction in guardianship orders within the budget. That is just the same. We are seeing no increase around what they will do around supported decision-making for people with disability, families and carers to reduce guardianship. So a lot of those matters come to us.

We do work with older people, so we are also supporting people around the aged care system. Even getting access to the aged care system, which I totally respect is federal, but for many people they are actually dying before they can get a service that they need, which is just absolutely abhorrent.

Then we have people that are left in hospital way longer than what they need to be. When they are in hospital and they are trying to get out, they are potentially being encouraged to go to an aged care facility, which they do not want as they would rather go home. But, however, there is not adequate supports to be able to help them go home. When they are left in hospital for longer than what is seen as an acute matter they are then charged a daily fee. So through no choice of their own they are stuck in hospital being charged a daily fee that they then have to pay that they have no money to pay.

MS CARRICK: My question sort of comes back to that housing one, in two respects. I was going to ask, is there enough respite services for disability? I know with aged care it is problematic as they are in hospital too. Then the second part of the housing one was about—I know people want their own homes but is there a place for more of, like Project Independence where you have—or Burrangiri, but it is a permanent home, where you have 15—well, co-housing, I guess.

Mrs Prowse: I guess when it comes to housing it needs to be a person's choice.

MS CARRICK: Yes.

Mrs Prowse: That is fundamentally someone's human right. They get to choose where they want to live and who they want to live with. I think for some people Project Independence may work, but for many people—and we even see with some of the disability housing that government has built and built very well—they put them all together and then there is disruption, people do not feel safe, everyone moves out and then it is a housing complex that is not being used.

So for me, single dwellings is often one of the best choices around how do we make sure that we can support people around that. That is often what people want. But once again, there needs to be choice. I do not want to be dictating that we need to go down a certain line. I think it is about really understanding what works best. I think we can see that from all the apartments that were taken down along the city centre. We knew that they did not work. So why would we go back to try and also put people into an institution? Because that is pretty much what it can be.

MS CARRICK: Yes, I think they need choice. I just think some of those 10 and 15 bed ones are handy to have around for different—for people that might want that sort of thing. What about respite services then?

Mrs Prowse: When I listen to my colleagues, I certainly hear that respite is a massive issue, but that is not something that people come to us looking for, I have to say.

MS CARRICK: I would like to understand more about the guardianship thing that you have been mentioning. It was in your submission. You were talking about you are not seeing a decrease in the budget papers?

Mrs Prowse: Ultimately, what we would want to see, as a human rights' territory, is that people are making their own choice, so they have choice and control around their own life. The government did put in legislation that anyone that was having a guardianship order put in place needed to demonstrate that they had gone through a process of supported decision-making.

This is very much a model around looking at the capacity and looking at where someone's family or informal networks are also part of what that looks like, so people can make their own choice and decisions about their life, rather than there being guardianship and its substitute decision-making. My reflection on looking at the budget is the trend just remains the same. There is no ambition to actually reduce the level of guardianship within this territory. There is no education piece going out to inform people.

ADACAS has also done supported decision-making. We have done it with young people within schools, working with their families, where they have made choices—where parents, for all good intent, very tired, busy people, all the rest of it—where young people are then deciding what they want to eat, what they want to wear, what they want to do as a future career. In going through this process of supported decision-making, the family members can also see the capacity sitting within a person. That is what we would very much be encouraging and that is what the legislation was I think adhering to, but there was no financial investment put into that in a meaningful way.

MS TOUGH: You mentioned before about the issues with accessing aged care places and aged care packages and how that it is from the federal government but interacts with

our health system and our community services. What do you see as some of the things that ACT government is doing, and then could improve on, with helping alleviate those issues where you might not be able to get into aged care? What other supports are there?

Mrs Prowse: I think most people would just want to go home. That is absolutely their preference. I think it is about how do we build part of the system that already exists that might need expanding. So it could be how do we expand the CATS program that provides personal care, domestic assistance, meals and the like. How do we get some home modifications in place as quickly as possible? We need OTs to help us with that. Then often there is a clinical factor as well, you know, home nursing: how do we make sure that is available? But also how do we make sure that people are not lonely? How do we have the right community schemes where people can get visitors with all the safeguards around all of that? I think it could all lead into a really great way that we can safely get people out of the hospital more quickly.

MS TOUGH: You mentioned the need for OTs, nurses and all that. Are you seeing a shortage in staff in some organisations that are able to provide those services, or is there any staffing issues from the community sector side?

Mrs Prowse: I think there is more a lack of funding to be able to have enough people to be able to do things like that.

MS TOUGH: Yes, rather than people not being there.

Mrs Prowse: I think across the board, I think we all know within the healthcare environment that there is a shortage. I think we are all very well aware of that. Often the challenge will be that people aim to work in the public system because it is more financially viable for them than being in the community sector. So that is also another challenge that we face every day.

MISS NUTTALL: I think you touched on this point earlier, but a lot of disability advocates have rightly observed there is very little funding for disability advocacy, whether that is individual, but specifically systemic disability advocacy. I want to acknowledge it is an incredibly difficult situation because you are probably constantly supporting people who come up against systemic barriers, and you are compelled to try and advocate to change the system, even when you are not funded to do so. Would you be able to give us a rundown of the current pressures on your organisation when it comes to systemic advocacy?

Mrs Prowse: Absolutely. So in short, we do not get any money from the ACT government for systemic advocacy at all. Nothing. So I turn up today, and I turn up to every other consultation meeting that anyone wants to invite me to. I participate in many things, across a month, trying to make real change happen within the ACT that is going to improve the lives of people with disability, people with mental ill health and older people, with no funding at all. We get a very small amount from the federal government, but that would not even pay a person one day a week. So we just do our very best where we can, to continue to add value, and I think all I can share with you is the fact that we support 1,700 people with 3,000 cases. That gives me a lot of intel. So that is the information that I am able to share at every meeting that I go to.

MISS NUTTALL: Absolutely and drawing it as you go. If systemic advocacy was well funded, what would that look like for you, either in terms of quantum but also what it would enable your organisation to achieve?

Mrs Prowse: Yes, it would help ADACAS. I actually see the value would be back to government because I often say to my team, “ADACAS is the canary in the coal mine.” When the system and reforms start to change and we see distress happening with people, we are the first ones to generally hear about it. Then we have to navigate whatever that new system is with the new rules to support people, however that is going to look. The NDIS and My Aged Care are two great examples of that, but it also can be the housing system when they change forms and systems and processes and all the rest of it.

Being able to have someone that can focus on what the information and the data is—and we have invested a lot into our client management system so that we can start to collect some really meaningful data—having someone that can then do that analysis and put that picture together. My sense is then coming to meetings like this and others, that we can build solutions together because we have more of a chance to tell you what is really happening on the ground in a really meaningful way, and then we can potentially do focus groups and other things and the like, to look at how we do actually make real change together.

So to me, it is an absolute investment that unfortunately the government has not taken up to this point. Well, not with organisations other than peaks and ADACAS is not deemed as a peak. Nor, can I just say, do we necessarily want to be seen as a peak, but we would absolutely value anything that is going to help us increase the amount of advocacy we can do to support people, but also bring that intelligence together with the support of someone doing systemic advocacy, and then working with government around solutions.

THE CHAIR: As a supplementary to that, in terms of priorities as an organisation, do you see the most value in the systemic potential or in increasing capacity to serve people for their individual circumstances, as you do at the moment?

Mrs Prowse: That is a really hard question.

THE CHAIR: I know it is.

Mrs Prowse: At the moment, I have 200 people on a waitlist waiting for an advocate in the ACT. Those people are waiting months to get support. In the interim, we keep trying to work with them around where we can support them to self-advocate where it is appropriate. But, potentially, if I can get another five advocates or thereabouts and a systemic advocacy person, that would at least give me a solid footing to look at in more detail what the key concerns are around people and then how we work with government around solutions. And it is not just us individually. I work really closely with my colleagues and peers across the community sector. We are often looking at how we can support people. Obviously, this is not about clients per se, as in individuals; it is often around what the trend is and how we can try and support people.

MS CARRICK: We heard previously that, if it is busy, you have to rush to the casework and deal with the casework, and that does not give time then to do the

networking with your peers to build the community and the support and the services. So I guess that is across sectors.

Mrs Prowse: Absolutely. There used to be funding for community development a number of years ago and that all got pulled away. People would come together and work out how they could better understand how services were being provided to make it more seamless for people in the community to be able to access those services. That used to work really well, but that has not existed for quite a long time now.

MS CARRICK: Has that led to sort of fragmentation of services?

Mrs Prowse: No. I would say it is just led to more scrambling, and for key people within an organisation to do the research to understand what it is and then share it. But how the community sector works really well is through relationships. It is about knowing people that you can actually ring up, rather than just knowing an organisation and what they can offer. My organisation is not a crisis organisation, but I can tell you that we deal with crisis every single day, constantly. Being able to pick up the phone to someone that you know and say, “I have this person with this situation; can you help?” and then they will also escalate it on their end, makes a massive difference for individuals.

So we make it work. I think it is just, again, more taxing. If we think about the level of burnout that happens across the sector, that is due to the fact that we do not have the time and the capacity to really do this in a meaningful way; we are just rushing from one thing to the next.

MS BARRY: We have heard that, for women with disability, issues around domestic and family violence are exacerbated. I just wanted to hear from you what you think we could do to improve the supports that are there and if the supports are even sufficient. I am guessing that your answer would be no. But I just wanted to get your views about that and perhaps how the system can work to address it and where the gaps are.

Mrs Prowse: I think part of it is about accessibility and it is also about understanding the different types of disability. I think it is also about supporting people when often the carer or the partner that is also providing care is the perpetrator. That is a massive issue. So it is about being able to have a system where potentially it is the perpetrator that leaves rather than the person with disability—so they can remain in the house. The house has already been modified for them.

It is about making sure that they are safe and protected, making sure that they have the right support networks in there and making sure that they are also financially able to stay in that housing. That is one of the other big things. Most people with disability are living below the poverty line, at best. If you have a perpetrator of violence that is the main income earner, how is this person going to survive, particularly if it is in a private rental? They are not, and that is where we see the cycle happen again.

MS BARRY: Is there anything currently that fills this gap? Is there anything in the budget—again, you probably would not know, but is there anything you know of?

Mrs Prowse: Not that I am aware of. I know DVCS got additional funding and a couple of the other services got additional funding, but I am not aware of where any of that

was specifically focused on people with disability, or even being able to increase the advocacy hours to be able to support people. Another issue that we deal with all the time is around supporting people who are experiencing domestic and family violence. But that is just part of our remit; we do not get any specific funding around any of that.

MS BARRY: In an instance where a person presents with domestic and family violence where the perpetrator is the abuser, how would you go about supporting that person where the abuser is the financial breadwinner of the family? How would you go about supporting that person?

Mrs Prowse: All of our focus is about that person's will and preference. We are not there to tell them what to do; we are there to share with them what their options are and to walk beside them as they are making a decision around what they want in their life. That is fundamentally how we work across the board with every single person that we try and help. We let them know what their choices are. We can talk through what some of the consequences might be. We will let them know what the supports might look like. But, ultimately, it is their decision, which can be very hard.

MS BARRY: You spoke earlier about some of the barriers and the constraints around providing the service that you provide. For example, you mentioned the secure local job requirement and the portable long service leave requirement that hinder your ability to do what you do effectively. You also spoke about data and that you hold a lot of data. There have been conversations around providing better data structures for this space, and I just wanted to get your views on how that would effectively make service provision better for people living with disability and whether it is centralised or that individual data that is held is kept properly and well by organisations.

Mrs Prowse: I think we all need to be able to have our own data systems. Legally we are required to whenever we have a government contract anyway. But, that being said, there is never an awareness of government within those contracts around the absolute cost of building those data systems when we do have a contract. That is not fundamentally put into anything at all.

With most data systems, to have something that is comprehensive that you can actually extract meaningful information out is extremely expensive. ADACAS has invested in that over the last number of years because we recognise how deeply important it is for us to be able to not just work with people individually but also share the wide story of what is going on across the community, and that is our goal. So I think, fundamentally, if we are going to share data more holistically, the challenge around that is you have to be comparing apples with apples. That does not often exist when people are providing different services and it can just lead to a whole lot of complexity.

We have seen lots of conversations about outcomes frameworks and the like. I think those conversations have been going on for 10 to 20 years, and, really, we are still yet to see the fruits of the labour around that. It does not mean that we are going to stop. I think we are all fundamentally trying to do the best that we possibly can to demonstrate what is happening in someone's life and how we are trying to make a difference in their life. And be it for the better or be it for the fact that the system is so broken, government actually needs to do something about fixing the system.

MS CARRICK: I have a question on the procurement nature of that question. Previously, one of the witnesses talked about procurement and it needing to be in the context of people, because people are different to procuring a building or something and people have stewardship and have built up their relationships. In your sector, could the procurement be more people focused and cognisant of the relationships that have been built up to date?

Mrs Prowse: Absolutely. In some respects, I think the ACT government has invested in a number of organisations across the territory to provide good human services to our community. I would hate to see that investment be pushed to the wayside for some other vision that they might have. Fundamentally, I think it would be beneficial if we could all come together and design what is actually needed and what the skills and the capability are around that and how we build upon that by still respecting the relationships that already exist.

I know for us at ADACAS, out of all the people that we saw last year, five per cent of those people were new; the rest of those people were people that were known to us that come back to us around different matters all the time. We often see their capability expanding over that time where they might not need us as intensely as they previously did because we have helped build their capability and their confidence. But, fundamentally, people will come back to people they trust. Often we talk about First Nations people and the CALD community and all the rest of it, and trust is very hard to build but it is very easy to lose. So we need to make sure that, across the board, our community sector is well and truly supported to be able to keep on supporting those relationships in a way that is building the capacity and the citizenship of our vulnerable members of the community.

MISS NUTTALL: The government has released a number of disability strategies, obviously with more in the works thanks to recent legislation, many of which were developed in consultation with the community. We know that part of the strength of disability strategies is the funding that is needed to see them fully realised. What disability strategies does your organisation interact with and have a bearing on? What disability strategies affect you, and do you feel like those are resourced to support you?

Mrs Prowse: We are funded through the federal government to do what is called the Employer Confidence Program. We build the capability within mainstream businesses to want to employ people with disability. We know employment is a key focus both for the ACT government and the federal government around supporting people with disability. That is something that we have invested in over the last number of years through the support of the federal government. If we think about the Disability Health Strategy, we are helping people navigate the health system every single day. To me, with a lot of those strategies, the government has very much focused on what government needs to do rather than how the private sector and even the community get involved in some of that.

Part of that is how we can make sure that it is actually working. Individual advocacy is really important to make sure that, as these strategies start to be implemented, they are actually working. If they are not, people will come to us and let us know what is not working. That happens to us in the aged-care sector all the time, where service providers are not doing the right thing by individuals. That is a big part of the work that we do

around advocacy for older people.

MISS NUTTALL: If you are thinking of the health strategy in particular, are there particular parts of that that, if funded well, probably would make a difference to your organisation in the way it operates?

Mrs Prowse: It might reduce the number of people that need advocacy. That would be a bonus for people. But, if I think about the Disability Justice Strategy, the ACT government has given us a bit of money. I mentioned before the supported decision-making that we were doing in schools. We have pivoted that to now do that in Bimberi. We are now doing supportive decision-making with the young people in Bimberi. That is around helping them with their decision-making while they are still incarcerated and helping them through that process but then also envisioning what a future could look like after that and understanding the consequences around some of those things. That is a program that we have only started doing this year. It is working really successfully, and we can only hope that funding will continue—though we have not been promised anything of the like.

MISS NUTTALL: How long is that particular program funded for?

Ms Prowse: I think it goes until either December or June next year. I can take that on notice and let you know.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MS CARRICK: My question is around the funding across the community sector to ensure that people stay in the sector—the certainty of funding. Commissioning was supposed to, I think, provide that certainty of fundings, but I am not sure that it has quite got there yet in the disability sector. Have you had your commissioning sorted yet?

Mrs Prowse: No. We are part of the CATS Program, and we went through the commissioning process to get funding to be able to support people within the hospital environment through CATS. So we have been part of that journey. We are still waiting for the mental health commissioning process to commence. We would be part of that. But, with our individual advocacy, there are actually only two organisations in the ACT that provide individual advocacy. There is us and AFI. We get a very small amount of money from the Office for Disability to provide that individual advocacy, but it is pretty much less than 1.5 staff.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. 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*. Thank you very much. Once again, it was very valuable.

Mrs Prowse: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I really do appreciate it.

Short suspension

CRIMMINS, MS FRANCES, Chief Executive Officer, YWCA
ROSENMAN, MS ELENA, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Legal Centre
WEBECK, MS SUZANNE, Chief Executive Officer, Domestic Violence Crisis Service.

THE CHAIR: We welcome witnesses from the YWCA, Women's Legal Centre and the Domestic Violence Crisis Centre. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and you are bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions, and while there are things I would really like to dive into, I know Ms Barry is itching to ask some questions.

MS BARRY: Thank you for coming in today. In your submission, Ms Crimmins, you mentioned the value of peppercorn leases. I wanted you to expand on that and why it is really important that these sorts of leases continue to exist with community organisations and whether you have seen anything in the budget that goes to addressing that need.

Ms Crimmins: We hold a concern that peppercorn leases continue to be on a month-by-month basis across the community sector. For example, Mura Lanyon Youth and Community Services Centre operates month by month. That is a valuable service where we are providing place-based services on behalf of the ACT government. We think that the ACT government needs to recognise that as part of the funding for those clients who come in. It provides amazing place-based services, and other organisations utilise it.

It is also really important in this environment that we have certainty across the sector for peppercorn leases for early learning and education. Sadly, what we are seeing across the nation are risks emerging in for-profits, and the federal government stepping in to build early learning centres across the country with their current policy that they are building, Early Learning Futures. I think it is vitally important that the ACT government step back into providing and being a provider of early learning centres that are managed by not-for-profits in the community.

Sadly, we see a centre in the middle of Civic that has been left derelict by ACT infrastructure. That has been left empty since September 2024 despite us offering to go in and immediately continue that operation following the closure of ANU services. Closures of these services really concern us, and the fact that these assets are left sitting, falling into disrepair and graffitied is really concerning. Our own Conder Early Learning Centre had a section that was empty for eight years. It took us eight years of negotiating. We funded that fit-out and it is now open for that community, who really needed access to affordable, quality early learning service. So, as to the issue of peppercorn leases and the uncertainty, giving us letters of comfort does not give us much comfort. That is what we have been issued to date.

MR RATTENBURY: You say it took you eight years to negotiate. Who were you negotiating with?

Ms Crimmins: That was then the ACT Property Group. We basically left a section of the Conder Community Centre empty for eight years while we had a full centre down the other end. We are very happy that that is now not the case. But that just shows you that it is an unutilised asset that nobody else could utilise, because we had three-quarters of the space for an early learning centre. That is the type of frustrations that we face. I am aware that other people who provide early learning are also on these month-by-month peppercorn leases, all sitting on a letter of comfort.

I am not quite sure what takes so long. When there might be other options, like our Reid Early Learning Centre that is part of the CIT campus, we have been told we can have that licence, but we must vacate because they are planning on selling the site. So, again, this is why we get concerned and nervous about what is the true agenda of the ACT government being a provider of community-based early learning centres.

THE CHAIR: Across those eight years, did you have any indication that there was going to be an outcome at the end of that?

Ms Crimmins: No.

THE CHAIR: So that was eight years on the hope that you might get there?

Ms Crimmins: Yes. The original offer was that we would take over and start paying rent. But you cannot provide the emergency care that we do on behalf of the ACT government and a three-year-old preschool if you are paying commercial rates—because we do not get market rates for those places. So, again, what is the responsibility the ACT government has for providing education in those first 1,000 days for children?

I think there is a case for maintaining these centres that are in our suburbs. They are close and children can walk with parents to these centres. They are really vital community hubs. The importance of a not-for-profit centre providing it is that, if we have a family who needs food, our staff just reach out to our community service providers. I know all the other community-based organisations do the same. It can be a good place-based service. It is really concerning to us to see the upkeep, the devaluation and not maintaining these centres in a climate where everybody has been making money out of early learning and when you see the sale of land to build new early learning centres is in the millions—and they are selling for millions in the ACT—and why we need to bring it back to being community-based.

MS CARRICK: I know of two in Woden. Lollipop, in the Woden Community Service, has gone. Then there was a CIT one—

Ms Crimmins: Yes, at Bruce.

MS CARRICK: There was one at Woden too—the Woden Early Learning Centre, which was run by the CIT but now is run by parents. I think that is at risk, too, because it is hard for parents to run it.

MISS NUTTALL: Has the instability of the peppercorn leasing arrangements, the fact that they are month to month, ever affected your ability to attract the childcare subsidy or any sort of government initiatives or grants? Has it affected your ability to attract

families to the centre or keep them there?

Ms Crimmins: It is our inability to plan for commissioning. It is my inability to commit fully to things like the three-year-old initiative and the three-year-old preschool. If you look at the Lanyon Community Centre, we are in a commissioning cycle and we need to know that that is going to remain a place-based service that will allow us to be a food pantry; a place for the Ukulele Club to come with the people who live across the road in the government-provided services for seniors; for our youth centre to work; for Care Financial to come in to do drop-ins; and for Men's Link to come and do support for young people. That is on a month-by-month basis. That is what many community organisations are facing.

Ms Rosenman: I just wanted to add to what Frances has been saying. Certainly one of the things that I noticed and welcomed in this year's budget was that the ACT government very clearly spoke to women as a cohort of interest in their communications around the budget. I think that is really important.

One of the things that I have observed happening more and more strongly at the commonwealth level is the commonwealth government thinking about gender equality as a driver of economic prosperity for all people. One of the things that I observe—apart from all of the things that Frances has talked about, all of which have value in their own right—is that access to quality early learning allows women's workforce participation, which is a driver of economic prosperity in the ACT community.

So I would say that this budget took some positive steps around thinking about women and speaking to women directly, but I think there is still some work to do to think about women and build budgets for using women as economic agents and part of the solution to the budget hole that the ACT finds themselves in at the moment.

THE CHAIR: It sounds like there are good signs in terms of words, but there is some way to go in terms of the actions to achieve that.

Ms Rosenman: An analysis—actually thinking about the link between gender equality and economic prosperity. I think what is interesting in the Women's Budget Statement—and Frances, tell me if this is right—is that it does not include any commentary about access to early childhood learning as a driver of economic equality. It talks about some of the terms and conditions for early learning centre staff. But it is that next level of maturation, which is actually understanding of the community that this issue is linked to the bottom line that the ACT government then has to solve other problems. Women who cannot access quality childcare—to Frances's point—where they are confident that their children are safe and well cared for will also then not be in the workforce.

MR EMERSON: Just very quickly, I just wanted to ask about the Civic centre. Have you been given a reason as to why you are not able to take that on—the early learning centre in Civic?

Ms Crimmins: No; nobody has been able to provide a reason why it is sitting in disrepair and graffitied. I do not know whether it is because they are planning on selling it. We have not been given any response. We immediately wrote for the continuity of

those parents to say, “We will keep it functioning. You can then do a tender or however you want to do it, but we cannot again lose another community-based centre right in the middle of the city.” We need to make sure that in our city planning there is a place for children, and that is in early learning centres. Children have a right to education. We are building all these apartments in the city and we are encouraging families to think about apartment life. They also need access to education.

THE CHAIR: Perhaps we can find out more through this process.

Ms Rosenman: I would also say that that early learning childhood centre in the city—and I could be wrong about this; I will double-check—provided emergency crisis care for women who needed to access the courts.

Ms Crimmins: Yes, it did.

Ms Webeck: It did.

Ms Rosenman: It is very close to the courts. I am also not sure about what has been put in place.

Ms Crimmins: Nothing.

Ms Rosenman: That means that women either have to take their children to the Magistrates Court or they will not attend.

MR RATTENBURY: A new snapshot from Homelessness Australia has revealed that there has been a 20 per cent increase in the number of women and girls already homeless when they sought assistance from services. This has happened between 2022 and now. I would be interested in your reflections on whether you are seeing this reflected in the ACT and whether there are sufficient measures in the budget that might address such a problem.

Ms Crimmins: That dataset that was released today by Homelessness Australia reflects our frontline service and all of our properties. We were concerned in the budget that the former funding boost to specialist homeless services was not going to continue because it was under the former parliamentary agreement. We are relieved that it has, but it has remained at the same level. So, while across the ACT we are seeing an increase in people needing homeless specialist supports, the funding has remained at the same level since that funding boost was introduced in the last parliamentary period. So we would be encouraging that we need to look at the homeless services funding across the ACT.

MR RATTENBURY: Did you mean “four years”? You said four months, but—

Ms Crimmins: Yes, sorry—four years.

MR RATTENBURY: I was just double-checking that I had not misunderstood you.

Ms Crimmins: It was four years. I meant four years, yes. That is the 12 per cent funding boost. The indexation that we receive does not cover the cost of wages. The current ratio of 20:80 per cent is not keeping pace with costs. To put it in context, the SCHADS

award got a 3.5 per cent plus the additional half a percent superannuation. The 3.25 per cent does not equal that, when you add in your utilities and operating costs. Because this has been going on now for so long, I imagine it would be harder for smaller entities with single line funding to not have to cut back on services in this environment.

Ms Webeck: We are seeing a 10 per cent increase in the length of time that particularly women and children are remaining in our crisis accommodation, which often does not get factored into the housing homelessness statistics element as reported by the ACT. Since the 2023-24 financial year until the end of this last financial year, there has been an almost 10 per cent increase in time needing to be spent in our emergency accommodation.

MR RATTENBURY: I presume that is because there has been nowhere to progress to.

Ms Webeck: Over the course of the last four years, increasingly, we have seen those in our crisis accommodation transitioning out of our crisis accommodation often into unstable living environments. The transition through to refuge, supported accommodation or government provided accommodation is not at the rate it once was on the basis of there being a lack of availability. So we continue to see people returning to properties after security measures are in place or to couch-surfing arrangements, or we are supporting interstate relocation based on safety needs but also availability of accommodation in the territory.

We have seen a stabilisation to our crisis accommodation commitment from the territory, but we have not seen an increase in that. Also, tangibly, over the last three years, there is a full three per cent difference in wages and superannuation comparative to the indexation we have received, let alone the cost of service supplies like accommodation, cleaning, transport and those associated costs for people that are coming into crisis response needs.

THE CHAIR: It sounds like the money that is coming out from the government to services has been indexed closer to CPI rather than the real increase. The way the wage price index is clearly much higher. You have got other costs that are layering on top of that. That seems to be the case across all sorts of different services.

Ms Crimmins: Yes. I think the \$10 million commitment over two years is a sign of good faith. But we need to really have that shared work, with ACTCOSS leading it, with the ACT government on the true cost of providing service, and then it not be a tokenistic amount—which it could be for some. It is a very short stop gap, but my view is it is not sufficient. But I am hoping it is a sign of good faith that we will start to see that work progress and understand the true cost of providing the service.

We do know that it just has not kept up with population growth. A huge driver for us all is the growth in population. That is not necessarily everybody who is moving here who is economically independent. We are also seeing more and more people falling below the poverty line, primarily single-headed households—our survey shows us, being women and their children.

Ms Webeck: We also need to think proactively about the procurement processes

moving forward, around the value for money proposition attached to procurement processes, which arbitrarily pick a budget amount that they are operating to, which might be very far from the cost of service delivery. We are seeing more and more in that environment—the decentralisation of expertise and specialist service responses, because of the ability of other entities to undercut the cost or purely because the request for a quotation against a program is delivered and the top of the budget of that is well underneath what it would actually safely cost to deliver that service for the ACT community. So, while we have an issue around securing and retrospectively supporting the secure funding of existing programs and existing service providers, we need to apply that same learning to procurement processes as well.

MS CARRICK: Regarding procurement, we heard in previous sessions how it needs to be people focused and cognisant of the relationships that have already been built with existing service providers, not just be about value for money and cuts to services. Is that an issue in your part of the sector?

Ms Webeck: When we are engaging in procurement processes with the expertise of a specialist response agency in the ACT—and there is our interconnectedness with the criminal justice system, as well as support, healing, recovery and response and other areas of partnership across the community—those who are evaluating responses to tenders in procurement processes do not have expertise around responses to the safety and wellbeing of our community regarding domestic, family and sexual violence. They are assessing tenders on a series of, I guess, bureaucratic measures that do not inform whether the application is safe, fit for purpose or able to be executed in an integrated way with the rest of the service system.

We are increasingly finding a broader approach to funding domestic, family and sexual violence responses, which means that services being procured may be working nine to five. At 5 o'clock, they start calling the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, because we operate the 24-hour crisis response, and hand over clients or come during business hours to seek a consultation. They do not have specialist response systems and practice frameworks in place or connection to the rest of the service system. It is a cheaper cost to the territory, a higher cost to our community and a higher cost to the services that are sitting in the background having to support the upskilling and connection of other providers without any resources to do so.

MS CARRICK: Understanding the existing stewardship that you have.

Ms Crimmins: The procurement processes that we have undertaken are not done by commissioning; it is competitive tendering. To give you a live example, while we were participating in the sustainability of the sector, the ACT government invested in bringing expertise from the University of Western Australia to understand direct and indirect costs—to present that to the ACT government. I would then be asked by a senior executive: “Why do you have 20 per cent indirect costs?” There is no respect that we actually have to run backbone organisations. There is an obsession that everything is frontline. That is impossible. We actually have to pay people, we have quality improvement, we have accreditation and we have compliance. An 80-20 model is really lean, and to be questioned on your financial model, as to why there is a 20 per cent indirect cost, is not in the interest of a genuine partnership and not respectful. We are still more cost-effective than the government in delivering the

service itself. You have one arm of government commissioning and there is a procurement, and then you have somebody talking about: “What’s this indirect cost of 20 per cent? Why isn’t there more in frontline services?” That is the service; that is the cost of delivery. We need to get the social compact back on. We need to have genuine partnership, because we are all here serving the residents of the ACT.

THE CHAIR: I think this is an important question. When you are talking about this, is it a contract for services or is it a grant?

Ms Crimmins: Both. There are new contracts for 10 years. What most of us do is stopgap with the very small grants—\$5,000 here, \$10,000 there. It might be something for women’s safety. There is a pool of about \$80,000 for that which we would all seek to supplement.

Ms Webeck: Some of us do not have secure funding. We have yet to go through a commissioning process that has landed in results for the Domestic Violence Crisis Service. We did go through the housing and homelessness commissioning, only for it to be rolled over for another year. We have a range of disparate contracts that are either funding agreements or grants. Some of our grants are for program delivery—not a grant pool that we have applied for but a grant that is being provided on the basis of a kind of paperwork approach to having that service in place swiftly. We have some commitment to four-year funding out of this budget, but outside of that we have just one year of funding, either by grants or service level agreements.

THE CHAIR: It sounds like there is no clarity around government services versus your services that the government is providing grants to support because it is a good idea. It sounds like there is a fair bit of confusion and patchwork.

Ms Crimmins: If the government have decided that the not-for-profit sector will deliver these services—and clearly the role of Sue’s organisation is a vital community service—they have to recognise the cost of doing that.

Ms Webeck: Yes, but also the cost of not doing it. There is also the cost of having to manage a multiplicity of funding arrangements and reporting requirements across a range of often similar programs. There is also the decentralisation of expertise when it comes to procurement processes, where it is going to ultimately cost more for the delivery of an activity if it is not considered as part of a specialist response that provides a 24-hour response to the community, as well as men’s behaviour change, case management support, brokerage and emergency accommodation. There is a duplication of costs. When a procurement process goes broad and a new provider to the ACT comes in or there is a provider that does not have the ability to support the client cohort after hours, then there is duplication of the cost that ends up sitting with frontline agencies. It would have a significant impact on the Canberra community, as well as the territory budget line, if we were to withdraw from supporting them.

MS CARRICK: The Auditor-General’s report talked about looking at the needs in the sector, the strategy that is underway, reporting and evaluation—a number of things, including, at the front end of it, needs and the strategy. I know that the minister has done some ministerial statements and a government response. How is that all progressing?

Ms Webeck: Currently, the concept of the strategy and the approach to developing the strategy has been provided to a consultancy in Victoria. They have been contacting sector representatives and organisations to discuss the manner of the approach to the development of the strategy and key priority areas. A frontline worker consultation is being undertaken this week, I believe. I am not sure what the time line is from that point on or what the development of the strategy will look like following that. You could probably say it is in progress but not particularly clear on the intention and the way forward.

MS CARRICK: There is a lack of clarity around it all.

Ms Webeck: Yes—complexity in the centralisation of the expertise that we hold in the ACT across service providers and areas of response, and who is being invited into that space versus who may not be, and what the intention and path forward will be, provided by a consultancy outside of the territory.

MS CARRICK: The audit report also talked about reporting. Do the recent budget papers provide better reporting than previously about, basically, the Safer Families Levy and how that is being distributed for services?

Ms Webeck: The budget papers were certainly clearer, and incredibly handy explanatory documentation was provided by the minister's office. It is a little bit like comparing apples and oranges, in the sense that the territory's budget this year also took into consideration the national partnership agreement funding and how that will flow and be attributed. But, certainly from an on-the-ground perspective, it was easier to navigate the bouncing ball of the dollars, particularly against the Safer Families Levy.

MS CARRICK: Thank you.

MS TOUGH: I am interested in something that was talked about by Ms Crimmins and Ms Rosenman earlier about the risks of for-profit early learning providers in the early childhood education and care sector and ensuring that children have access to high-quality education and care that is safe and trusted by families. Are these services providing the emergency and short-term care and the three-year-old initiative across Canberra or is this falling predominantly on the not-for-profit sector?

Ms Crimmins: No. Emergency child care and the three-year-old initiative are only provided by the not-for-profits. The broader three-year-old preschool is open to any early learning service.

MS TOUGH: Thank you. Obviously, the not-for-profit sector is doing a great job in providing that service, but do you know whether there is a reason that is not more broadly available, given that there are more for-profit centres out there?

Ms Crimmins: I would like to put on the table that the funding is probably not sufficient to cover the market costs, to be frank, particularly the three-year-old initiative. It is below even our most affordable centre where we pay commercial rent. We have had to withdraw from the three-year-old initiative because the funding is about \$30 below what we set as our market rate, if you have to pay commercial rent. We are only re-

engaging where we see the more vulnerable people in our Conder early learning service, because there just is not enough funding to cover it. You are often talking about children who need one-on-one support. That is something that would need to be addressed.

With all of the national conversation coming on, I really want to give a shout-out to all ACT providers. Reporting of incidents and our transparency are good things. That is really important. We do not want to discourage this. In my opinion, the regulator does a good job of regulating and following up. We do not want to discourage over-reporting or reporting of incidents. If I could put it in context, a serious incident might be a child having an asthma attack. You responded appropriately, but you still logged it. It becomes a critical emergency incident if you do not know what you did with their Ventolin. That is really what is important in this conversation: logging every serious incident. That is where you follow trends.

Our Reportable Conduct Scheme with the ombudsman is a very good system and is working. I would note that other states and territories have not implemented that. Our allegation based system is robust, and we want that over-reporting. The ability to call and say, “Oh, does this mean—” is really healthy and keeping children safe.

MS TOUGH: How do we make sure that parents realise that over-reporting is actually a good thing and make sure our system is more trusted? How do parents make sure that they know that it is a good system to have, even though there are higher rates compared to others?

Ms Crimmins: That is part of education. That is what I hope will come out at a national level: education and over-reporting. Reporting all incidents is positive for tracking trends and to have the system of both the regulator and the ombudsman. That feeds into the Working with Vulnerable People background check. It is for five years. We do not rely on it at all when we recruit. You have to do police checks and other checks. But the Reportable Conduct Scheme and reporting to CECA is, in my opinion, a robust system that we have. Our staff do not fear reporting; it is normalised.

MS TOUGH: That is good to hear. My next question, following on from that, touches on what Ms Rosenman said earlier. If families are losing trust in the system and they are not engaging with the system at all, whether that be not-for-profits or for-profits, or whatever version of provider is in their area, what is the medium- to long-term risk for the community?

Ms Crimmins: We know that the first 1,000 days of early learning education for children is pivotal. That research has been done. That is why the investment in three-year-old preschool and giving free access days is critical for children’s development. Also, to Elena’s point on women’s participation in the economy, while it benefits all parents, we know that it is primarily women who choose to opt out if they do not have access to quality, appropriate and place based services close to where they live or work.

MISS NUTTALL: How much of an impact does proper resourcing make on the safety culture at centres and the ability of educators to keep young people safe?

Ms Crimmins: It is absolutely vital. Also, because of the ACT’s portable long service leave scheme, you can see that the not-for-profit providers pay early educators above

the award in the ACT, compared to the for-profit sector. There is access to professional development training. I am aware that CECA is running it day to day for the sector. We have to allow time for people off the floor to do professional development. Safeguarding children is about providing an environment where children thrive and learn. That is the full picture and the holistic view of safeguarding children, where they are exploring, where they are doing risky play, where they are learning and where they feel comfortable to engage in their social development as well as their educational development.

MS BARRY: Ms Crimmins, you talked about your organisation undertaking criminal history checks, against Working with Vulnerable People checks. We know that has become a topical issue in recent times. I want to find out what you think needs to be done in that sector to make Working with Vulnerable People checks more effective and efficient?

Ms Crimmins: As an employer, I would like to report to the Working with Vulnerable People, like the allegation based ombudsman. I would like to be able to flag. I have previously worked in the healthcare system, and it was the same, whether it was for nursing registrations or medical practitioners. Being able to flag near misses is really important. The ability to do that with the Working with Vulnerable People background check is really important, as well as understanding the transparency between the ombudsman and Access Canberra's office. Issuing a five-year card is a long time. As an employer, I would not recommend relying on that alone.

MS BARRY: Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: I am keen to chat a little bit about the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy. We anticipate a new one will be needed soon. In terms of the strategy, what targets do you think the ACT government should prioritise for the upcoming 10-year strategy, and how do you think they should go about developing the strategy more broadly?

Ms Webeck: The ACT has a broad cross-section of agencies working in the domestic, family and sexual violence space now, more so than ever before in the territory's history. It is incredibly important to frame a strategy that centralises the experience and expertise of agencies, specialist or primary response agencies and secondary response agencies, but also to bring into scope the intersection with entities like health and education. The strategy requires bold ambition. It requires us to really be cognisant of the national agenda as well to make sure that we are working collaboratively and in step with that to ensure the effective utilisation of national partnership agreement money.

We have an opportunity in the ACT to work quite collaboratively between the sector and the government and ensure we are centring the voices of those with lived experience in our community. I would like to see a true approach to co-design in the development of a strategy that has both realistic and attainable targets, but also lofty ambition and goals. Many of us would deeply like to not have a job working in this environment, but we are a long way off that. One of the central tenets will have to be the approach to governance of the strategy to make sure that it does not become another "reportable as per policy" implementation from government—that there is operational governance that sees a really meaningful approach to articulating what is happening underneath the

strategy and whether that is working, with the ability to pivot when it may not be working.

The absolute must-have is coordination and understanding of what is happening right now across areas of government, across community place based initiatives and community based initiatives, to ensure that we actually have an understanding and coordination of what is happening in the ACT, because we still do not have a fundamental overview of that to ensure that we have a comprehensive set of information about government activities that are relying on community agencies to execute and what community agencies are being funded to do or are being driven to do in response to the priority communities that they are working with.

Ms Rosenman: Obviously, I endorse the need to actually develop the strategy in partnership with specialist services, but also to really think about how we use the expertise that exists in the specialist sector to then build the ability and capacity of mainstream touchpoints for people to identify domestic, family and sexual violence and then provide support where they can, making sure that there is a clear avenue to the right places.

The strategy should include a focus on access to support. I often say there is a very common misconception in the ACT community that everyone who wants help in relation to domestic, family and sexual violence can get it, and that is certainly not the case. At the Women's Legal Centre, we run a nine to five service, so one of the things that we would like to see a focus on is access to the service after hours. DVCS is the only 24-hour crisis service and it is clearly not resourced at a level that is commensurate with need. We are one of the services that are often in discussion around after-hours support for high-risk people.

The key thing is that it takes a systems based approach and analysis of the experience of domestic and family violence—that is, how do all the interacting systems affect people's experience and track them in one outcome or another? In line with that, I also think that the strategy has to engage with and drive the investment of all portfolio areas of the ACT government in responding to this issue. At the Women's Legal Centre, we are particularly concerned that it includes access to specialist legal assistance, which operates out of a different portfolio area but is absolutely critical to women experiencing domestic and family violence being able to access assistance.

To go back to Ms Carrick's point—a question around the Auditor-General's report—one of the things that it showed us is that, whatever the strategy looks like, it has to have a focus on transparency and accountability so that we are actually measuring, reporting and understanding what is happening to people in the ACT who experience domestic, family and sexual violence. Can they get help? And, when they can, what difference does it make to the outcomes that they have? While it is not the point, I would say it is directly relevant to the main purpose of these hearings: people's ability to contribute to the economy and actually supporting all Canberrans to access that kind of help.

Ms Webeck: We also need to be really clear that we are currently sitting at a table built around a hearing on impacts for women in the budget. We need to remember that investment in domestic, family and sexual violence responses is not an investment in

women in and of themselves; it is actually an investment in our whole community. Where is the place to talk about men's behaviour change programs in that work? Also, there is the diversity of the lived experience. We need to ensure that we are focused on delivering domestic, family and sexual violence responses for LGBTIQ+ community members, as well as people in intersections of disability and migrant refugee status, and also those who experience domestic, family and sexual violence and do not fit into "keeping women and children safe," which is often the narrative. There is also the narrative around funding initiatives to support people to leave or flee. So many members of our community live in a cycle of violence in their intimate partner and family relationships, and their intention is not to leave but to increase safety. We see many of the initiatives driven towards leaving, so we need to have an appropriate community based strategy that ensures that we are capturing the lived experience of the territory.

THE CHAIR: I am conscious that we have gone slightly over time, but a couple of members have been waiting a long time for their questions. Is there any concern with pushing on and—

Mr Rattenbury: If the witnesses are available.

THE CHAIR: That is right. Could we keep it fairly tight. We will go to Mr Emerson first and then, if we can, we will get to your question, Ms Barry.

MR EMERSON: Ms Crimmins, the budget contains an increase in the property cap, under the government's affordable community housing land tax exemption scheme, from 250 to 1,000 properties. I understand there is also a \$50,000 increase in funding to deliver your Rentwell program, which is part of that broader scheme.

Ms Crimmins: My first thought is that it is good to see the ACT government is embracing our Rentwell program, which we established on our own in 2019 after initial resistance to the program. Then they realised that it is actually a very expedient way to get affordable rental properties that are available in the market today. On hitting 1,000 tenancies, we made a decision to cap it at 250 properties.

MR EMERSON: How many do you have now?

Ms Crimmins: We are currently sitting at 150. We have added an extra property manager. The cost of running Rentwell is more substantial because we are doing the income assessment up-front for eligible tenants—it is targeted—and then we pass on the information. We are performing due diligence on behalf of the Revenue Office, that the people who enter the scheme as a property owner are eligible for the land tax exemption. I think every taxpayer would want to know that these people are meeting the need that is set out. That actually has a higher cost. Each property manager could probably appropriately manage only 120 properties. We have given advice that the funding provided—the first \$50,000 this year—is not sufficient to employ another property manager. What they actually need to do is bring that funding forward. It grows over four years. If we are going to build capacity, we need to have additional property managers now to be able to meet the need today.

We do not charge full market property management fees, so we will only be prepared

to grow if the risk-taking of growing the portfolio, managing debt and managing all of the income and the assessments is shared with the ACT government. We are now committed. This policy commits 1,000 of the 5,000 properties being delivered by Rentwell and CHC's program. That is a fifth of what the government has put on the table. Half a million dollars to support that over four years, with us taking most of the risk? I think there could be a little bit more money on the table, given it is meeting a fifth of the set affordable housing target by 2030.

MR EMERSON: Thank you.

MS BARRY: We talked a lot about women and the safety of women. Often, what is missed is older women. Do you have line of sight in the budget on whether it sufficiently addresses concerns about older women experiencing homelessness and domestic and family violence?

Ms Webeck: We have not seen any particular targeted investment in response to domestic, family and sexual violence for older women in our community that would see a holistic response around transitioning to long-term secure and safe accommodation. Many of the programs that are available currently create a requirement around co-pay or co-support. We often find that older community members who need our services are at significant risk of financial abuse and control, but also the intersection around declining health and wellbeing and having access to money to self-support or to navigate commonwealth funding systems creates a real vulnerability and slow-down for that population group to access supports. There was certainly no evidence of a targeted intervention and response for older women, particularly for those experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, which would co-exist with the housing and homelessness issue.

Ms Crimmins: We have the funding from ACT Housing in our program for older women: Next Door. We have capacity in that to support, depending on complexity, 60 to 80 older women at any given time. That program is always full. It also serves the purpose of getting people back to social connection. It does not have any Housing ACT properties attached to that funding, unlike other programs out of Housing ACT. We utilise a lot of the properties that we own, that we have built, and also, if we can, some of the affordable properties through Rentwell. It might be a granny flat that costs around \$200. We have two group homes for older women, plus another eight individual stand-alone properties that we own. We utilise them to full capacity at all times to try to meet the need, and we also support some other community housing programs by providing support for older women under Next Door. The issue is, again, affordable rental properties in Canberra that somebody on the single pension or working part-time can afford in the ACT if they do not own their own home.

MS BARRY: You said that your service is over-subscribed.

Ms Crimmins: Yes; it is always full. As we are able to transition people out, we always have the next person to bring in.

Ms Rosenman: I agree that there is no focus on older women. That is not an area that has had a focus to date. I would certainly encourage a focus on older women experiencing domestic and family violence to also deeply consider access to specialised

legal assistance, particularly when we are talking about the missing middle. Older women in heterosexual relationships are more likely to be in relationships that have some form of assets, and women need to be supported for those assets to be divided post separation. In a town like Canberra, there are a lot of assets and there are a lot of male partners in heterosexual relationships with very comfortable super balances, and the super balance is part of what a property settlement will consider. Thinking about how we are supporting women to access family law advice and representation to make sure that the division of assets post a relationship is fair and equal will actually stop some of the stream of women into the crisis and emergency response services that my colleagues here are responsible for.

Ms Crimmins: The other huge need is elder abuse—the number of cases we see of adult children taking advantage of their single mothers. They need that same legal advice. The need is growing.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. 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*.

Hearing suspended from 12.24 pm to 1.18 pm.

BUTLER, MR LACHLAN, Chair, Belconnen Community Council
HEMSLEY, MR RYAN, Convenor, Molonglo Valley Community Forum
HUNTER, MS SIMONE, Chair, Weston Creek Community Council
THOMPSON, MRS RACHEL, Treasurer, Woden Valley Community Council

THE CHAIR: We welcome witnesses from Belconnen, Weston Creek, Woden Valley and Molonglo Valley community councils. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and are bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. I will be quite indulgent; I am very grateful that I have so many people here from my electorate. We will start with Mr Hemsley and Molonglo Valley, and the infrastructure pressures—in particular, transport. We have had discussions over a long period about the importance of sorting out roads and transport more generally in Molonglo Valley. Have you had a chance to look through this budget and see, on the current trajectory, whether we will be able to sort out those road problems before things get worse?

Mr Hemsley: Thank you very much for the question. As you have outlined, there are a range of transport pressures in the Molonglo Valley. Obviously, it is a consequence of the fact that we are the fastest growing district in the ACT. We started off from a low base, but we do envision that there will be 70,000 people living in the Molonglo Valley over the coming decades.

At present we have a lot of construction underway. Work on the Molonglo River Bridge is in progress. There have been some consequences arising from that, with respect to closures at Coppins Crossing that, for once, are not induced by water. That means everyone is forced to use John Gorton Drive, if you live south of the Molonglo River.

We see in this budget some preliminary work towards addressing those problems. Obviously, in the short term, funding has been allocated towards an options assessment for the Cotter Road, to investigate what opportunities exist to alleviate some of those pressures in the short term. That is specifically in relation to the stretch of the Cotter Road between Streeton Drive and the Tuggeranong Parkway. A contract was awarded to WSP Australia earlier this month, or potentially last month, for the work that would identify what options could possibly be undertaken to alleviate those issues.

In the longer run, the big game in town is what is now known as the Molonglo Parkway-Drive connector, previously known as the east-west arterial. Realistically, it is an eastern extension of Holborow Avenue. This is the most significant infrastructure project that we will probably see in the Molonglo Valley—probably even more significant than the current Molonglo River Bridge, as a consequence of the fact that it does need to connect to the Tuggeranong Parkway via a very significant grade-separated intersection, as well as a second bridge across the Molonglo River.

We understand that it is a joint ACT and commonwealth government project. At this stage we understand that it is a longer term proposition, with construction stretching out, at the very least, until the 2030s. We are keen to see that detailed design work take place. Hopefully, that will give us a clear indication as to the likely completion

timeframes for the project. As with all projects, you want to make sure that you are aligning your infrastructure investment with the land use planning, and to that end we have consistently advocated for this project to be brought forward—not to be completed in the late 2030s, but preferably even into the late 2020s or, at the very latest, the very early 2030s.

THE CHAIR: My big concern is around that sequencing. It looks like we will end up with far more people in Molonglo Valley before we have additional transport connections, in and out. What sort of impact does that have? This is for Ms Hunter and Mrs Thompson as well, because the impacts certainly flow into Woden and Weston Creek. What sort of impact does that have on people's daily commutes, on traffic that they are facing?

Mr Hemsley: It causes delays. I experienced it this morning. My bus, as usual for a parliamentary sitting day, during the morning peak period, on a school day, got caught in the congestion between Streeton Drive and Tuggeranong Parkway, along Cotter Road. That meant I was late into the office, certainly later than I had intended to be, given the false hope that school holidays often give to your daily commuting patterns.

THE CHAIR: Ms Hunter, I know that there are flow-ons to Weston Creek as well. Are those flow-ons still being impacted? I know that there have been some changes.

Ms Hunter: There have been some changes. We have regularly provided feedback to the transport services area regarding lights, coordination and things like that—the synchronisation to support the heavy flow of traffic that is coming from Belconnen, through Molonglo and across to the parliamentary triangle. Yes, there are certainly flow-on effects for us, and we support any immediacy in these sorts of infrastructure projects that help to alleviate the pressures there.

THE CHAIR: It was remiss of me not to mention Mr Butler, because, clearly, people in Belconnen are impacted as well, at the other end of Molonglo Valley. The Bindubi Street extension in the future will be pretty critical. Are there any views on what is happening in that area?

Mr Butler: It is definitely an issue that will impact Belconnen. As you have alluded to, it is a connective point for Molonglo Valley. Molonglo Valley at the moment lacks a town centre, so they come to Belconnen. That connection there is really important. With respect to the William Hovell Drive duplication, and the traffic that comes along there, we need to see that duplicated, and we need to get on with building the infrastructure that people need.

MR CAIN: The budget papers indicated some enhancements for Belconnen. Lachlan, was the absence of William Hovell Drive a bit of a concern, in terms of a priority?

Mr Butler: It is always tricky because, in every budget, it looks like the William Hovell Drive duplication is just about to kick off and, as I am sure we all know, that has not happened yet. The money is there; we are grateful to see that it is still there and that it has not been taken away. We just need to see construction start, with that one.

MR CAIN: What is your understanding of the timeline for that duplication?

Mr Butler: Imminent—very soon.

MR CAIN: Or is there one?

Mr Butler: I have been told “very soon” for the entire time I have been chair—about three years.

MR CAIN: That was said some time ago, I believe.

MS CARRICK: Yes, timeframes are an issue. On the transport corridors, do you know whether they are planning cycle paths along these arterial roads?

Mr Hemsley: It is a fabulous question, and one that is also of great interest to the Molonglo Valley Community Forum. We understand that there are a range of active travel initiatives planned for the Molonglo Valley, both in the more immediate short term and over the longer term.

In the short term, we are quite keen to see the completion of the shared paths that currently reach but do not completely connect around the Coombs Peninsula. They are a very obvious gap in the path network. It means that if you are trying to use that path to, say, cycle into the city, if you live on the wrong side of the Coombs Peninsula, it requires a rather rocky and quite dangerous journey up onto the roadway that is shared by articulated buses during the morning peak periods, which is less than ideal.

Likewise, there have been plans for some time to complete a new active travel bridge over Weston Creek, near the current RSPCA site. That project has been much like the William Hovell Drive duplication—“very shortly”, “soon to commence”—for many years. From my understanding, the latest information we have been given is that construction will start sometime in the coming financial year. Again, we have heard that on multiple previous occasions, and we will believe it when we see it.

There are also more significant plans for active travel bridges across the Molonglo River itself. These are contentious, I understand, within government, as they do traverse areas that could be described as environmentally significant. There is, indeed, I understand, an open question as to whether any active travel infrastructure can even be built within the Molonglo River Reserve itself. We will wait and see what the outcomes of those internal government discussions are likely to be. Obviously, we are advocates for current residents, and the future 70,000 residents, and we are quite keen to ensure that they are provided with as many travel options as possible.

MR RATTENBURY: On the road that you spoke of earlier, the connector from the town centre out to the parkway, it had a new name that I had not heard before.

Mr Hemsley: The Molonglo Parkway-Drive connector?

MR RATTENBURY: That is the one; thank you. What is your understanding of how that impacts on the arboretum, if at all?

Mr Hemsley: Again, this is me venturing into vague conversations that I have had in the past. There are a range of matters pertaining to where the arboretum interfaces with the existing Tuggeranong Parkway road reserve. Obviously, the intention is to locate the grade-separated interchange, which will be built as part of the Molonglo Drive connector, entirely within the existing road reserve of the Tuggeranong Parkway, which, as some historically-minded people may recall, was intended to be a much larger, grand road, and has a road reservation that is appropriately wide to accommodate that.

It will be interesting to see how that works. Detailed design for that particular part is underway. We do not know as yet what discussions have taken place between the arboretum and the team within TCCS that is responsible for those advanced concept designs for the project. We envision that it will continue to take place within the existing area of the land on either side of the Tuggeranong Parkway that is currently reserved for future road infrastructure.

MS CARRICK: My understanding is that it connects south of the arboretum.

Mr Hemsley: Yes, it does. That is very much the case; it will not be running through the arboretum, but it does abut the arboretum, at the very southern point of the arboretum.

MR RATTENBURY: Quite close to the Cotter Road interchange.

Mr Hemsley: Yes. It is a project which requires many pieces of enabling works, I understand. There are intentions to build a second bridge across the Molonglo River, just north of the existing Cotter Road overpass. Of course, how you minimise weaving, as people merge onto the Tuggeranong Parkway off the Cotter Road intersection and then do not immediately find themselves in the off-ramp onto the future Molonglo Parkway-Drive connector, is a tricky situation. We trust that, with the high quality of road engineers in Roads ACT, they will be able to come up with an elegant solution for that.

Mrs Thompson: It is a bit like coming onto Adelaide Avenue, coming off from the north end of Deakin,

MS CARRICK: From Cotter Road?

Mrs Thompson: Yes; then you immediately go off as well, if you stay in that lane.

THE CHAIR: It seems like something that deserves a fairly holistic approach with planning, rather than just looking at stage 1 of a project; it will need end-to-end consideration.

Ms Hunter: Could I support Ryan's comments? We made a specific request at the budget roundtable for expediting of a safe cycling active travel route down Streeton Drive. That would support active travel through that pathway and onwards, either to the city or to the parliamentary triangle. There has been no word on that.

MR RATTENBURY: The City and Environment Directorate is engaging SGS

Economics & Planning to conduct an ACT community recreation and sports facilities needs assessment and social infrastructure audit. I am interested to understand whether any of you have been engaged in that process and have had the opportunity to have input. I am interested particularly in Molonglo, obviously, with its rapidly expanding population. Has anybody been involved in that process?

Mr Hemsley: There was a community needs assessment undertaken last year in regard to the entire Molonglo Valley. That piece of work, I understand, is still underway. The listening report from that consultation exercise, I believe, was released earlier this year. Again, that pertains specifically to the Molonglo Valley—all of the Molonglo Valley, I would note. But it is a Molonglo-specific piece of work, and we have not had any engagement with SGS about an even larger, Canberra-wide piece.

Ms Hunter: I have been privy to some conversations coordinated by the federal local member, where community groups were brought in and asked about their needs. The conversation that was had was that we needed a coordinated approach to community sports facilities and needs assessments, because things are being floated. Projects are being tossed around and they are not suitable. They are not fit for purpose and not in the right space. A lot of time and money will be wasted if you do not consult the community early and often, and get the best ideas in place.

At the moment, with community sports facilities, we have constant requests for indoor sporting facilities, for basketball. In Weston Creek in particular, we are supporting Weston and Woden gymnastics for expansion in that space. There is a huge need for more space for them, and for basketball.

Across town, all community groups are calling out for renewal of facilities. I think that everyone wants to work on this in a collegial and holistic manner, so that we are looking at the whole of Canberra, or sharing facilities and amenities within communities. In Weston Creek, we have a plethora of sporting grounds and open spaces that we can share with our Molonglo residents. It is just a matter of whether we have the transport to get them there. If we look at it more holistically, there is definitely an opportunity to get some good work done.

Mrs Thompson: I would reiterate that, from a Woden community perspective. We have a lack of facilities for the community in the whole valley, and I think that is well known now.

MR RATTENBURY: Yes, my colleague tells me regularly!

Mrs Thompson: I am sure she does! We plan to put in a submission to the sports inquiry that is happening, and work collaboratively with our south-side members on that. There is certainly a very big need for community sporting facilities, and not necessarily high end and elite sports. We are very much craving community sport; that is what we desperately need.

Ms Hunter: We have spoken about this before in Weston Creek. There are now some really significant barriers for kids to access facilities. When the gates were put up around all the schools, because of one problem over here, you have actually locked out all the kids from accessing the basketball facilities that were on the outside of the

schools—places where they can train and become better basketballers, and continue to participate.

The barriers to participation are pretty significant at the moment, in the public realm. I think it is a really worthwhile investment to keep kids playing sport. We also need to work together across the community to make sure that there is a good mix of facilities in the right spaces.

MR RATTENBURY: It is not just about basketball; it is about socialising, getting outside, getting active—all those things.

Mrs Thompson: Absolutely.

Ms Hunter: The mental health benefits that that provides are really important.

MR CAIN: I am interested in Belconnen Community Council's engagement with this assessment. I can think of something like the Hawker tennis courts, which are very disused and abandoned, in a wonderful sporting precinct in Hawker. Do you have any thoughts on that? Also, what is your general thrust for Belconnen, with this needs assessment?

Mr Butler: We have heard vague comments around the assessment, but we have not been spoken to in any formal or informal way about the assessment. The Hawker tennis club that you mentioned is a great example. The most important thing to remember is that almost one in four people live in Belconnen, and 70,000 more people will be calling Belconnen home by 2060. The issue is that we do not have enough sporting facilities now, and we do not have a plan to ensure that we have enough sporting facilities in 2060, when we will have 70,000 more people.

Mr Hemsley: Building on the previous comment from Simone about the fencing issue, this is a particularly sore point in Molonglo because, specifically, in the town centre precinct, there will be only one source of open space for recreation. It will be surrounded on three sides by the Molonglo River Reserve. As I commented earlier, there is a strong desire to keep people out of the reserve, on the basis that it is not so much a recreational resource for the community; it is a nature reserve.

Consequently, we have been working with government, to the extent that we can, to try to get some sort of assurance that the oval that will be built, as part of a future Molonglo high school and college, is not surrounded by a six-foot-high black fence. This was alluded to in correspondence we obtained via FOI during the initial preliminary discussions between the then Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, sports and recreation and the Education Directorate about the recreational needs of that facility within the Molonglo town centre. Those conversations are still ongoing, but it is of great concern to us, and we will keep fighting to ensure that we can keep the Molonglo town centre oval fence free.

Mr Butler: It is not just an issue of whether or not there is a fence. It is an issue of access. We have seen primary schools in Belconnen where a fence gets put up and the community is told, "You'll be able to access this between this time and this time," and it never happens.

MR CAIN: Again, with a Belconnen focus—forgive me; I do care about the rest of Canberra—Big Splash is a major recreational attraction in north Canberra, and the whole of Canberra. Are you concerned about its future? In terms of this sports and rec assessment, it certainly falls right into scope, as something that deserves preserving.

Mr Butler: Definitely. The government needs to be really clear about what it expects from private operators of facilities like this. When Big Splash was bought, a couple of years before it was closed down, it seems that they may have had particular intentions when it came to using it. If the government wants it to be a recreational site, it has to be pretty clear about how it will make sure that that is the case. You mentioned earlier the Hawker tennis club. There has not been a Hawker tennis club in 10 or 15 years.

MS CARRICK: I am interested to hear your views about town planning, which includes the homes that we need, where our commercial areas and public spaces will be, as well as community facilities, roads and active transport—the whole kit and caboodle of town planning to meet the needs of communities. Do you feel that you have enough engagement in the planning for your areas?

Mr Hemsley: I have a couple of very specific examples. Engagement is all well and good. It is lovely to be consulted on, to attend workshops and roundtables, and to take time out of your Saturday while experts walk you through lovely pictures of what could happen. But all of that means nothing if the only product of that engagement is a nice, glossy document which then gets thrown in the bin at the first barrier. We have seen that happen in the Molonglo Valley very recently with the failure of the Coombs and Wright village tender process and the Whitlam local centre process.

People in the Molonglo Valley took quite a bit of time out of their lives to participate in the engagement processes that led to the formation of those community-led design and place frameworks. There was a lot of faith and belief that, after the debacle that was the Coombs shops, we had learned the lesson, and we would be looking to ensure that we selected developers for these sites that actually have proven project delivery capabilities.

To see all of that work go through years of waiting and then have the projects fall over is incredibly disheartening. Certainly, it has something of a corrosive effect on people's willingness to engage in the next engagement activity, on the basis that they may look at it and say, "I spent X number of hours engaged in developing these glossy documents which meant nothing because it turns out that we produced a piece of work which was ultimately financially not viable for any proponent who wanted to develop the site." Engagement is good. Engagement that leads to an actual good town planning outcome is better.

Mr Butler: I agree with Ryan there. You can see it with the Belconnen town centre as well. They did a lot of consultation to create the Belconnen town centre master plan of 2016. If you look at it today, all the problems that have been identified are still there. There is no part of government that is genuinely responsible and held accountable for delivering what is in the master plan.

That master plan talks about a population of 8½ thousand people in the town centre by

2031. We met that by 2021, but the plan has not been actioned. It is a very nice document. A lot of people put a lot of work into contributing and putting in an effort to try and make this a really nice document, but nothing has happened from that. That is one of the reasons why one of our key recommendations is to have a Belconnen renewal authority, or some sort of interagency task force that can actually deliver what the town centre master plan said would be delivered.

Mrs Thompson: I absolutely reiterate that, from a Woden Valley perspective. It needs that holistic approach. Even though there were plans for Woden and how it should function, with all the additional high rises that have been put in there, it seems to be piecemeal, block by block, and taking things away block by block, as opposed to looking at it holistically. We would absolutely encourage a renewal authority or something of that nature to look at it holistically. We are putting in a submission to the inquiry regarding the Woden town centre, and what those future needs look like. I think that is a good start.

With respect to the engagement side, engagement implies that it is a two-way process, that we are being listened to and that there is change that happens that supports what the community wants. We think that, as others have said, they take our feedback and it appears to be put into a report and not actioned, it is all too hard, or it is not the direction in which the powers-that-be want, rather than what the community wants. That is why we petitioned really hard to be able to get that inquiry about the Woden area.

Ms Hunter: On behalf of Weston Creek, we had specifically requested, at the budget roundtable, a district planner to work with us. If you have a district plan, we want someone from the ACT government, a sole contact point, to work with us so that we can help to deliver that district plan and reach all the other goals that you have regarding missing middle housing et cetera.

MS CLAY: I was interested in the Belconnen submission and other submissions that called for a renewal authority in different town centres. When we have asked government about this in the past, as to why there is not one in other town centres, sometimes the answer that comes back is, “The businesses have to pay and they wouldn’t like to.” I cannot help noticing in the budget papers that we have \$12.1 million in 2025-26 for the CRA infrastructure policy.

Ms Hunter: Yes, in the Infrastructure Investment Program?

MS CLAY: Yes.

Ms Hunter: I noticed that myself. There is \$5 million for the City Renewal Authority, plus they have an extra budget allocation. It feels quite unfair because a lot of this has already been renewed. It seems that there is an ongoing wheel of renewal in the city and in spaces around here, and no renewal happening anywhere else. If Belconnen needs a renewal authority, the south side definitely needs a renewal authority. But you are right, Jo; there is a lot of money there.

Mr Butler: I also argue that you do not have to copy and paste previous ideas in their entirety. The government could fund it completely. The thousands and thousands of new ratepayers in the Belconnen town centre expect that their rates go towards paying

for stuff like this.

MR CAIN: Regarding town centres, you will be aware that the planning and environment committee is undertaking an inquiry into the Woden town centre. With respect to the other town centres, are you disappointed that there is not a more comprehensive embracing of Belconnen town centre, for example, in such an inquiry—and Molonglo Valley, Tuggeranong and Gungahlin as well? Is it a missed opportunity?

Ms Hunter: With regard to town centres, my personal opinion is that there is bitter disappointment in the removal of employment from these areas. There seems to be no plan. Employment is moving, and that is why you end up with traffic problems. If you draw a line from Belconnen to Woden, and down to Tuggeranong, all the employment has shifted to the east. We need some better direction and some more support to get employment back into the town centres, which they were designed to host.

Mr Butler: From our perspective, we do not want a situation where we restart the whole master plan process, go back to the start and ask people to spend years contributing to a plan that does not get actioned. We will also make a submission to the Woden town centre inquiry, mainly aimed at looking at what has not worked and how we can make government work in that regard.

I will not try and tell the committee what they should be doing, but if they come out with a bunch of recommendations about what they think Woden should look like, it is not going to happen. It has to look at the mechanisms of government and how to deliver a better town centre. Any committee members here that are on that inquiry should look at the Belconnen town centre as a really good example of how you have a plan, but it is not being delivered.

Mr Hemsley: Molonglo's town centre is a dot on a map, so we are not quite at the stage where we think we deserve the same sort of renewal authority.

Mr Butler: But it is officially a dot on a map now!

Mr Hemsley: Officially, there is a nice red dot on a map!

THE CHAIR: At least there is a dot there now!

Mr Hemsley: There is a dot!

MS TOUGH: I put a similar question to the Property Council and Greater Canberra this morning about the missing middle, and I am curious to hear your thoughts on it. I note that the short-form consultation closed today, and the reports are that it is being met with broad community support. I know there are still opportunities to be involved in various parts of the process and put in thoughts during the consultation. Were your community councils part of the consultation that has happened so far, or do you have plans to be involved? What do you see as potential barriers to the missing middle going forward?

Mr Hemsley: I will add a very brief comment on Molonglo's interest in this space. Because we are a district where the majority of it still has not been built, our interest is

in how it will shape future greenfield estates going forward. How will it work when you are selling blocks of land with no houses on them? What is the barrier to somebody buying three of those and putting up a small townhouse complex? That is not necessarily the worst outcome, but it is certainly not, I imagine, the intent of what the estate was for during that initial sales process. How do we appropriately manage the development of new suburbs with respect to the restrictions that have previously been in place, vis-a-vis the single dwelling per block approach, which has been very much the case for a very long time?

We are still waiting to hear back from the directorate as to how that works. It was a question that we put at one of the Environment and Planning Forum meetings on the missing middle. We will wait to hear back from the directorate at the next Environment and Planning Forum, to see whether it requires any further correspondence from our organisation.

Mr Butler: We share similar issues because we have the Ginninderry development. Tens of thousands of new homes will come out in that way and will be impacted by this. We are looking at doing a submission, and one of the themes touches on infrastructure. It only gets one paragraph in the draft missing middle design guide, on page 3, but it spruiks the benefits of more and better infrastructure.

The question that we want to put forward is: will that actually be delivered? It is very clear, in the Belconnen town centre, that there has been densification there, but traffic is a nightmare. If you try and catch a bus there, it is a matter of “bus full”, “bus full”, and “bus full”. The government has not yet committed to expanding Margaret Timpson Park. If there is going to be densification over the entire territory, how will the referral entities like TCCS make sure, firstly, that the amount of car parks, for example, are genuinely appropriate? Secondly, how will they make sure that they provide more infrastructure, when we cannot see it in a very obvious place like the Belconnen markets precinct?

MS CLAY: Lachlan, I was interested that in your submission you call for more education infrastructure in Belconnen. The Greens led that work last term; we got government to agree to doing a feaso on a primary school. Do you think that, with the population there, they should be doing a feaso on a K-12 for that infrastructure?

Mr Butler: It is definitely a possibility. We are not completely sold as to whether it should be a primary school or bigger than that. We have the college on the lakeshore, which is good. They should definitely be looking at it.

The government said in 2019 that the town centre needed it. Land will not magically appear. Every year that we wait to find a spot to build this primary school, it will get harder and harder. Our position is that we need to see what is actually needed and have a plan to deliver it. Even with a primary school, we need a spot to put it.

MS CLAY: Our colleges are reaching capacity, though, as well. Would you be concerned, if we just build a primary school, that we would run out of high school places for the kids to attend?

Mr Butler: There are definitely a few high schools in that area that are also reaching

capacity. The difficulty we have had with getting the primary school stuff moving means we need to start thinking a bit further into the future. We should make sure that we are looking 10 years into the future and thinking, “What schools will we need?” We cannot think, “The primary school’s really hard, we’re going to put it off,” because when we eventually get there, we will turn around and say, “Now we’re also missing this other infrastructure.”

Mrs Thompson: We are seeing that very much in the Woden area as well. Canberra College is the only college around. I do not think Molonglo has one. I am not sure if they have a college.

Mr Hemsley: Not yet.

Ms Hunter: No, not yet; and it supports Weston Creek as well.

Mrs Thompson: That whole area, including Weston Creek, is coming into Canberra College. They are at capacity, if not exceeding capacity at the moment. That is a huge issue, especially with the amount of additional housing and units that have been put up in our area. That needs to be considered as well.

Ms Hunter: There will be trouble with attracting smaller investment if the government is not willing to invest in the infrastructure to support it. This could be a great plan that starts and goes nowhere, if the government is not shown to be investing in places like Weston Creek. By the way, I would love you all to have a look through the budget and, if you can find a reference to Weston Creek, I would like to hear it. We would like to see investment. That would start to grease the wheels and get it going. More housing options are good, and more renewal is good, but we need the government to show support in the areas where it is going to happen, and Weston Creek is one of those areas.

MR CAIN: Again, going to Belconnen town centre, as you know, there was a promise from the federal government for funding to enhance Margaret Timpson Park. As advertised by the government recently in a glossy brochure, that will include a playground and a toilet. Mr Butler, given that it takes away green space by creating a playground and a toilet block—which are most welcome—do you think that strengthens the argument for the expansion of Margaret Timson Park over the hole in the ground?

Mr Butler: I think that there is a strong argument for expanding it because the ACT Labor Party committed to putting that infrastructure there, and the federal government turned around and said, “Actually, we’ll fund it.” If they were already preparing to spend a couple of million dollars on improving it, they can forgo the revenue from selling off that block.

I appreciate the argument for more housing, but there are hundreds, if not thousands, of dwellings already approved in the town centre. We need to look at why those are not being delivered. If you look at the JWLand Belco Central one, for example, that is approved for hundreds and hundreds of apartments. They demolished it, then they demolished the car park, and now they are trying to sell off the land. That is more housing there. If we want to sell more land to try and build more housing, we need to look at the SLA. The SLA put the Belconnen foreshore spot up for tender in 2021 for the first round. The second round happened in 2022; then we did not hear back from

them for years, until earlier this year, when they said, “We didn’t exchange contracts.” They have a block of land. They have spent years trying to sell it. They did not do well at selling it, because the process failed, and now they are looking at trying to sell it off again.

There is definitely a need for more housing, but that block is not the solution regarding housing. The town centre master plan refers to building a bunch of things, and none of those things have happened. It is a bit of a slap in the face to turn around and say, with respect to a plot where it makes sense to extend the park, “We’re going to build something there, too.”

MR CAIN: As you know, Ms Barry and I moved a motion in the Assembly a few sittings ago to expand the park, which was only supported by the Canberra Liberals, not by Labor, Greens or Independents. Has the Belconnen Community Council thought of lobbying the particular political groupings, to try and persuade them to approach it differently?

MR RATTENBURY: Certainly, Mr Cain.

Mr Hemsley: Can I put on the record that the Molonglo Valley Community Forum does not have a view on whether it is appropriate to expand Margaret Timpson Park?

THE CHAIR: I appreciate that, Mr Hemsley!

MR CAIN: I am sorry, Ryan. I know you are in the room, and I appreciate your being here.

Mr Butler: We will continue to advocate, with all three political parties, to try and get a better outcome here.

MS TOUGH: Can I ask a question? This is a federally funded—

THE CHAIR: We are going to have to wind up.

MS TOUGH: I have come along as well, and a lot of the conversation has shifted towards Belconnen. I would like you all to take a question on notice about federal funding in Weston Creek. With bushfire renewal funding, what renewal projects have been available and supported for Weston Creek following the 2003 bushfires? We can talk about housing renewal in that space, when you consider that.

Mr Butler: Can I make one very quick comment on that, Chair?

THE CHAIR: We are going to have to wind up, but I am very happy to have additional comments—

Mr Butler: I want to say very quickly that, when you look at the population projections from ACT Treasury, we do need to talk about Belconnen a lot, because for every person that moves to the Woden district, four are moving to the Belconnen district. For every person moving from Tuggerah, over 200 people are moving to Belconnen, so I think—

MS CARRICK: Lachlan, you have to note that those are old population forecasts, and the government has committed to bringing out new population forecasts that include government policy about missing middle and other policies. The current population forecasts have incredible growth in the north and Tuggeranong going backwards. They are not realistic; they are just an extrapolation of old data and they have committed to new population forecasts.

THE CHAIR: We have to wind up at this stage, rather than getting into district versus district.

MS CARRICK: I know, but you have to be fair. We all need stuff.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. 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*.

FRANCO, MS MARTINE, General Manager, Southern ACT Catchment Group
HOEFER, MS ANKE MARIA, Executive Officer, Ginninderra Catchment Group

THE CHAIR: We welcome witnesses from the Southern ACT Catchment Group and the Ginninderra Catchment Group. Please note that as witnesses you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. I will kick off with the Southern ACT Catchment Group. Ms Franco, your budget submission outlines that the catchment group undertook 30 projects as part of the Community Environmental Education and Stewardship Program. Could you please explain for us what investment that involved and what those projects achieved?

Ms Franco: The 30 projects are not part of our core funding package; they are competitive funding that we bring in in serving our membership. We have 37 members at the moment. Most of those projects are on-ground projects. They are about supporting our stewardship groups to undertake projects on ground in the parks and reserves around the ACT and also on TCCS land, that urban open space as well. Sorry; can you repeat the other bit of your question?

THE CHAIR: And what those projects are achieving.

Ms Franco: There are two components of all the work we do. One is to support the community to undertake environmental restoration work. That pretty much encapsulates serving the community interests as well as restoring some of our natural landscapes in in the southern ACT. All of our projects have both those components. We will not do a project unless the community asks us to do a project. So it has to be backed and supported by the community.

There is a lot of weed control that gets done by the community and there is a lot of volunteer labour. Every single one of those projects is at least matched in kind by volunteer hours and, of course, the three catchment groups. I think around \$3 million worth of volunteer hours are put into doing restoration works just through projects every year. That is the kind of input we get through leveraging our volunteers to implement some of those projects. There are a range of things. They build capacity in communities. There is a lot of educational sorts of things. There is a lot of promotional sort of work. But, mostly, it is on-ground work—erosion control, weed control, planting and that kind of work. We also work a lot along with the Upper Murrumbidgee area—so a lot of riparian restoration.

THE CHAIR: I know that there are some other interests in this as well, but I am very interested personally in the access to those environmental areas and accessibility through those areas. I believe that one of the things we are doing is around debris management. What is your experience along that Murrumbidgee corridor at the moment? I understand that there is a fair bit of that area that is now inaccessible.

Ms Franco: Do you mean inaccessible because of debris or weeds?

THE CHAIR: Because of debris, weeds and other environmental issues.

Ms Franco: Woody weeds are a massive barrier to getting access. A lot of those areas are not particularly well accessed by the public anyway, but a lot of the Upper Murrumbidgee is in a bit of a state of disrepair. The weeds have taken over a lot. There is very little biodiversity in those areas. The community cannot really access them or enjoy any of the social and leisure kind of activities they would do along the river. But, in terms of biodiversity, it is not just affecting things on the terrestrial zones; it is also affecting the aquatic biodiversity. The species that live within the instream areas of the river are affected by the weed infestations.

THE CHAIR: How is that happening? Are you saying that the weed infestations are impacting the aquatic biodiversity?

Ms Franco: Yes. If a weed species dominates an area, it does not allow a diversity of other species to establish in that area. That often means you are not holding the soil together well. The loss of soil means you are creating sediment within the water. There are lots of ways it happens, but diversity in those riparian zones very much affects the quality of water and the habitat of the native species that live there, particularly fish.

MS CARRICK: My question is on the importance of waterways. It is not only weeds that crowd out biodiversity; concrete also crowds out biodiversity. I wanted to get your views on riparianism and naturalisation of Yarralumla Creek. It is a fundamental waterway that the hills and ridges all feed into. Do you have any views about the opportunities or do you know anything about the government investing or planning to look at that?

Ms Franco: Anke Maria is actually probably better with these questions than me, having been a project coordinator forever.

Ms Hoefler: I think the ACT government has looked into re-naturalising Sullivan's Creek. As far as I understand, there is no budget yet to do the actual on-ground work, but it was an initial step to get the word out to do some consultation work. I think that was through Edwina and her team—Edwina Robinson. They talked to the community about what they would like to see, what is feasible and the kinds of changes that would include. Sometimes people are also afraid of more biodiversity and more naturalised areas, but see the great benefit and why concrete is not the best thing for biodiversity. That first step has been done. I am not aware of where we are going with this. It would definitely be a long-term plan, because it is a quite expensive project.

Ms Franco: They have started doing a little bit of stuff the government has invested in in Tuggeranong Creek. The community have been arguing for Tuggeranong Creek to be naturalised for a long, long time. But it is very expensive, and we only get little bits done at a time.

MS CARRICK: Why I raised Yarralumla Creek in particular is because it is on a transport corridor and it is zoned for high-density housing, a tram and a duplicated road. If there is no planning about naturalising the creek, then we are at risk of losing the opportunity to do so. It just does not seem to be on anyone's agenda at all, and I cannot

seem to get it on anyone's agenda.

Ms Hoefer: They have done some work there, and that is still improving. We initially had more diverse frogs there before they ripped it up, but hopefully it will work out and pay off in the long-term. This was specifically put in, as far as I understand, because if you go further down Yarralumla Creek, near the Governor-General's house, below that, the erosion is just massive. You have eight-metre cliffs of sand and you have horse paddocks on top. So that is really something we need to stabilise and slow down.

MS CARRICK: Do you think some sediment ponds and slowing the water down up the creek would help with that massive erosion at the bottom of the creek towards the Molonglo River?

Ms Hoefer: Absolutely.

MS CARRICK: At the top, which is what I am sort of concerned about, is between Southlands and the Woden Plaza. There needs to be discussion or interest in looking at slowing the water down there and having some biodiversity back.

MR RATTENBURY: Aren't there two wetlands in that stretch?

MS CARRICK: There is one that sits up off—it is like this overflow thing, yes—and there is one at the Curtin Gardens. They sit off the creek and they are good, but basically it is still a concrete drain.

MS CASTLEY: I want to go back to the original question about budget. The Community Environmental Education and Stewardship Program was funded by the ACT government until 2025 and, as outlined in your submission, there have been no new government contracts offered for funding to the group. In the time since your submission was made, have there been any contracts offered to the Southern Catchment Group?

Ms Franco: Yes, there has. It is not a new contract, but we have been given an extension of the original four-year contract. So we have been given that security. There is \$155,000 for this year to continue our current services, which are mostly member-focused, mostly supporting little community groups. We had previously been told that there was recurrent funding for our catchment groups—after many, many years of lobbying—but we are no longer confident that that is secured.

MS CASTLEY: So you have just got it for this year?

Ms Franco: We have just got it for this year. There are a lot of mixed messages coming out of the department about where our future funding is going to come from and whether it is going to be continued contracts, as currently exist.

MS CASTLEY: Do you have any idea when they are willing to give you that? Will it get to the end of the year?

Ms Franco: We met with Bren Burkevics, who told us that a review of all environment programs was going to be undertaken—and we welcome that review. I think there are

six environment organisations that get core funding from the ACT government. We welcome that review because it is always good for us to look at a refresh and see how we can better do things. That was a couple of months ago.

We were then at a Biodiversity Conservation Forum meeting, which is a fantastic forum for us to work with government, and we were told that a tender process is going to be released for all environmental groups. We said, “You told us that there was going to be a review that was going to take six months and, at the end of the review, we were going to be told, ‘This is how we want to move forward with funding you into the future.’” That has not really happened.

We have not been consulted. They asked us to engage honestly and deeply in the review, and we are kind of keen to, and we are waiting for it. We have now been told there will be a listening report. I do not know who they have talked to, but it has not much been us. We are now trying to understand what the parameters of this tender is going to be and whether we are going to be competing against each other or competing in an open marketplace for services that we have been providing for 20 years and built some very strong, solid relationships in the ACT with.

MR CAIN: I am interested in the Murrumbidgee corridor, as was mentioned earlier, but in particular the development in West Belconnen, which obviously Ginninderra Catchment Group are connected with. I am not sure if the Southern Catchment Group is impacted there. I am interested in the engagement you have with the SLA and the Riverview Group, as that development encroaches the Murrumbidgee, and whether you have some concerns about that or are seeing it tracking pretty well.

Ms Hoefer: So I have just started in this role, and it is only for a few months while Kat is enjoying her newborn baby—and rightly so. I have been with the Ginninderra Catchment Group since 2011 and from day one GCG has been engaging with the development very tightly. We started off with doing a biodiversity assessment that was quite in-depth about what was there to get a good baseline. We have been talking with Ginninderry. We have been really strongly advocating about changing the developmental design. Initially, of course, the top-dollar developments are the ones right at the cliff and looking down into the gorge. We tried to minimise these edge effects so we have been really advocating.

As part of the Ginninderry development, we have actually started a group which we call BoB, which is Bush on the Boundary. We have just won an ACT Landcare Award for this as an advisory group. It is made up of different panel partners—for example, the bird group, native grasslands and other representatives of the group and a developer—and we talk about all plans and everything that has happened in that advisory group. We give feedback and try to shape decisions as much as we can. We have been heavily involved. If it were for us, I think lots of that development would not go ahead, as there are many questionable points. But we are staying on their toes and we try to be involved as much as possible to keep it to a minimum impact.

MS CLAY: Anke Maria and Martine, thank you for talking about the budget funding situation. I am a bit concerned here about this too. Martine, you said that you wanted a small uplift in your funding bid from about \$150,000 to \$165,000 and then up to \$200,000 by 2028-29—if I have got that right. I think a lot of the groups are in that

quite small funding pocket and they have asked for quite modest increases. I have just heard not only that you do not have any multiyear certainty on those increases but also that there is a new process. Have I got this information right?

Ms Franco: Yes, that is what we have been told. The \$155,000 does not go far. It keeps us going and mostly what we are able to do is support members. We have a massive growth in our membership. Supporting 37 member groups—many new and many unfamiliar to working on public land—takes a lot of support and a lot of onboarding. So that \$155,000 does not get us very far. The \$200,000, which was, I think, in the third outyear that we requested probably would not have even covered the increasing costs for staff members. So you are right: it is a very small amount. And we are now being told that all funding is going out for open tender.

MS CLAY: This is really interesting. So you have gone from 29 to 37 groups, which is fantastic.

Ms Franco: Actually, we have gone from 19 to 37 since—

MS CLAY: I think Ginninderra Catchment Group is similar.

Ms Hoefer: We had 19 to 33 within four years, yes.

MS CLAY: To 33? It is a real uptick in interest.

Ms Franco: It is the same with the Molonglo Conservation Group—the same amount of uptick, yes.

MS CLAY: So you have to manage a lot more volunteers, and the government is getting all of that volunteer labour on the ground. You are not getting modest increases in funding and now you are being put through what sounds like a public tender process for that. It is interesting. Have you been given any information from government about what sorts of services people who tender for this might be required to provide? Do you know what that would be?

Ms Franco: We do not know what the parameters of the tender are. We have been asking about that. My greatest concern is that an open tender means that people who are not community organisations, have community-run boards or representative organisations. We call ourselves truly representative and the people on my committee are volunteers and they come from the ranks of the groups that we support. So we are purely representative organisations. That is the only way we can develop these trusted relationships for over 25 years, as most of us have done. So my concern is that the tender will open up to outsiders. We have no idea if they will come from outside of the territory or not.

MS CLAY: What timings have you been told about this process?

Ms Franco: Two to three months. They said they are going to put the tender out in two to three months.

MS CLAY: So it will be going out this calendar year.

Ms Franco: And we do not know the parameters. We also do not know if they are going to ask for different tenders for each of our organisations or if they are going to try and bundle us in together under a single organisation, which is not our preference because we are run by community organisations that have their own priorities for their geographical areas.

MS CLAY: Yes, and you have got different volunteers in different geographic areas.

Ms Franco: Yes, and we have done lots of reviews internally to see the best way we can function. We work collaboratively and very closely together, so we create quite good efficiencies across our three catchment groups. We are happy to look at that and provide better efficiencies and look at the best way we can do it. But, like you say, how efficient can you be on 155 grand each? It is only so cheaply that you can do stuff. We run about 30 projects at any one time, and they are mostly very, very tiny projects financially.

MS CLAY: It is interesting to me that these are quite small amounts of money. We are talking about amounts of money that are all under \$200,000, from what I understand. It does not look like that is reaching the thresholds we usually reach for open public tender. Has anyone in government had a chat to you about why? Has there been any reason that we need to go through this process?

Ms Hoefer: Efficiencies.

Ms Franco: I think efficiencies. We have just been given a general word around accountability and transparency, which we are all very happy for. As a not-for-profit, DGR status, community-based organisation, we jump a lot of hoops for accountability and transparency. All of our incomes and expenditures are publicly available. Every single one of those 30 grants, say, I have got on my books I have to do independent acquittals for—for every single cent that comes in and out. I understand that accountability and transparency are important for the expenditure of public funds, and we want to continue that accountability and transparency, but I suppose the question for me is: what is the problem we are trying to fix here? I cannot see what is exactly broken, and we have never been given any negative feedback from the services we have provided over the last 20 years. We have only ever been given positive feedback.

Ms Hoefer: I would like to add something with a different hat on. I am also the ACT and region FrogWatch coordinator and have been doing it since 2011. Programs like FrogWatch are grassroots. They were started by volunteers that wanted to do it, and they have grown bigger, and I feel there is intellectual property in this. We have started this—Ginninderra Catchment Group—and we have nurtured it. We have taken so many different twists to make it such a strong and representative program, with such amazing community engagement and outcomes. It does not seem right that this would all of a sudden go to public tender. It is intellectual property, in a way. You just cannot put it up for grabs.

Ms Franco: And I would say that is the same for all of our programs, including Waterwatch and our core funding, because we have created these programs with our community. We are very, very grateful for the funding that ACT government has

provided when the commonwealth stopped providing funding, but these are our programs, and they are not actually suitable for open tender.

THE CHAIR: I will just ask for a very quick clarification and then go to Ms Carrick for a very short supplementary question. It sounds like what you are saying is that programs that your organisations have developed, separately from government, are now part of the tender process that the government is looking to undertake.

Ms Hoefer: Yes, Waterwatch, FrogWatch.

Ms Franco: FrogWatch, yes. Separately, at points in time, the ACT government has funded them, and we have worked with them to develop some of those programs, and we have reviewed them with support from ACT government, so there has been some sort of a partnership there.

THE CHAIR: There has been support but they were—

Ms Franco: Yes—our programs initially. Twenty-five years ago, two of the organisations started from within government and then moved out to community. Ginninderra actually started out of community. It was the first organisation. So there are different evolutions.

MS CARRICK: A quick supplementary question on this, because it is a big issue, and it has been raised a lot this morning: competitive neutrality. A lot of the sectors have brought up procurement as an issue. They have all raised the concerns that you have. The stewardship and the relationships you have built and how you can reach out to other sectors and organisations—none of that is being potentially considered in the procurement of the new funding arrangements. I guess my question is: do you think that the criteria—if they have to go through this process—should include your stewardship and your networks and some of the stuff that you have built up in looking at the ongoing funding?

Ms Franco: Absolutely. I think what the community wants is those trusted ongoing relationships. That is what they want to continue what they are doing. A lot of them will down tools if they do not get the support that they get through networks like ours. If you want to keep the growth in the stewardship groups and the volunteering happening in the ACT, you have to support the support structures; and, absolutely, I think the tender has to detail those existing long-term relationships that we have with our members.

MS CARRICK: And the locals.

Ms Franco: And the locals, yes. Being geographically located in our area is really important. We are drop-in centres. People wander through the door because they live down the road, and they have got a little park, and they want to do something about it. They wander in the door and say, “What can we do?”

THE CHAIR: We are going to have to move on to a substantive question.

MS CARRICK: I wanted to ask about the biodiversity mapping. Do your organisations

have anything to do with that or work with the ACT government in mapping the biodiversity that is out there, or the areas that should be brought back?

Ms Franco: Are you referring to the biodiversity conservation mapping that I think has been headed up through Cons Council? That network? It is called the biodiversity conservation network. The Conservation Council got the ball rolling a couple of years ago, and it was to identify all the biodiversity across the ACT, across all tenures. One of the barriers is that a lot of things are mapped in reserve land, but not a lot of things are mapped outside reserve land on private land as well as the urban open space area. Yes, we engage in a lot of the committees that discuss it, and we feed information into the Biodiversity Conservation Forum about what the community wants in terms of this mapping. They want it to inform a lot of their on-ground actions. But where it is going and how well it is funded is a mystery to me.

MS CARRICK: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Tough?

MS TOUGH: I am interested in how the different catchment groups work together with each other across the ACT and how you work with government—whether different catchment groups have different interactions with government and different relationships and how that then works across the whole of the ACT.

Ms Franco: It is a really good question. Landcare across the nation has different models, and in the ACT we have one of the strongest models because we have only three catchment groups and we work very, very collaboratively together. We can create a lot of efficiencies in the way we run our organisations in the way our committees operate and in the way we report, and we also do a lot of collaborative projects.

If a grant program comes out and we all see it is a valuable program and it would look stronger if it happened across the whole of the ACT region, we collaborate together. One of us will put the grant application in, and we will run it together. In terms of how we operate together, it is extremely collaborative in the staffing space particularly. The committees are quite separate. They will collaborate together; particularly, the Chairs will talk together. We pretty much talk every week. We have got three Waterwatch coordinators—one in every catchment group as well—and they work as a Waterwatch team, and they support each other's work as well. The FrogWatch program is a regional program. It works across all three catchments.

In terms of our relationships with government on the ground, it is different because, for us, we work with the different depots and different rangers. GCG works a lot on TCCS land, because a lot of their groups are in that urban open space area. Mind you, we are catching up pretty quick. At an operational level, we have relationships in lots of different areas in government, and they are individual to the catchment groups according to the particular issue.

In terms of our funding arrangement, it is through the ACT NRM unit, and they hold us pretty tight. We have a very strong relationship with them. The environment grants go through them, and a lot of other short-term little bits of funding here and there come through the ACT NRM program. Our original relationship was with ACT NRM

because that is where the National Landcare Program money came through, which no longer does.

MS TOUGH: Thank you; that helps me see the broader picture. I know some of my groups down in Tuggeranong, but seeing how the picture works together is good.

Ms Franco: Yes.

Ms Hoefer: Yes, if we need to, we exchange tools. We help each other out if someone has a big event. It is really very collaborative in helping each other out, even with ideas.

Ms Franco: Yes, and in the structure of our organisations too. We support each other's governance as well, because it matters to us that we all operate as a Landcare network across the whole of the ACT so that we are represented well at the national level as a region too.

Ms Hoefer: It also has been a historical thing. When I came in in 2011, the catchment groups were a bit more like individual little boats—ships in the dark. But we have worked so hard over the last decade to really make us stronger, because, especially if I am trying to achieve good funding outcomes and make budget submissions, we are stronger together. But we all like to have our individual patches, because it works so well. We are really driven by what our groups want. They are our heart and our soul. They give us the direction by what they identify on the ground—what is important. It is nice to come together and to identify it—like the weeds that you mentioned before; they are just everywhere; they do not care about catchments, and we need to have a different approach. This is really good, because it is like a think tank coming together and having a look on the next level.

Ms Franco: We should mention our peak body too. We have a peak body: Landcare ACT. I cannot remember how long ago we formed it, but it came out of the three catchment groups wanting more of that advocacy type of role and support and high-level communication. We work very closely with our peak body at the moment. At the moment they hold quite a large contract with the ACT government that we work to as well.

THE CHAIR: Ms Clay?

MS CLAY: I wanted to know how you are going with sourcing plant stock for all of your restoration and planting work?

Ms Hoefer: We are trying to do a little bit in our tiny nursery that we have in the courtyard. Of course, it is nothing like what we need—not even scratching the surface. We find it quite difficult to get adequate stock, not just the right number but also the right plants. Often it means we have to get plants down from the coast and, of course, the genetics and adaptability of those seeds or plants is different to plants locally grown or locally sourced, so there is quite a limitation.

We see that also in a lot of ACT government works that are going on—that they have the same issues, and that they get plants that are not coming from the ACT. They are not local stock, and that has a lot of implications long term and short term in the way

of survival and how they are suitable—climate resilience. We would dream of, and we keep advocating for, having a nursery in the ACT that could be providing appropriate plants, the right species, and the right provenance for local plantings.

Ms Franco: That is right. This big gap has been noticed by all of the community groups—that we cannot source good local plants. And we cannot get good survival rates if we do not get good local plants, basically. We started a nursery at Lions Youth Haven in Kambah, and I have made ten applications trying to get it funded. I have had a couple of successes. ACT government has not yet funded me anything to help set up the nursery, and I am still struggling to get it going. I do not need a hell of a lot more to get it going; another 40 grand and we would up and going.

The volunteers are champing at the bit to have an opportunity to grow plants for their own sites. They also want a bit of a community hub to share knowledge. A lot of them are older volunteers who are retiring. The opportunity to volunteer in a nursery, with their knowledge, and to share their knowledge, pot up some plants and get them out into the reserves that they once were volunteers in—it is a missed opportunity, really.

I am still hoping. It is half built. I have got a polytunnel and some containers. I just need an extra bit of a boost of funding to get it going. That would be great—to get some extra government funding.

MS CLAY: It sounds like the kind of efficiency that would be more beneficial. You would get the right species for Canberra and also locally grown so they will be better climate adapted for Canberra and more likely to survive—

Ms Franco: Yes.

MS CLAY: You will get lower rates of loss from the things that you are planting, with maybe a small investment of \$40,000 for something that has already been built by the community. Is that where this issue is at?

Ms Franco: Pretty much, yes; as well as the opportunity to channel some of our older volunteers who are retiring into more appropriate, accessible activities. We can get much better diversity in volunteers as well, when you have got a nice, safe easy place that people can just sit around and pot up together.

MS CLAY: So it is a senior inclusion disability access issue as well.

Ms Franco: Yes, absolutely.

MS CLAY: You would actually be able to include more volunteers if you had this.

Ms Franco: And as a condition of the licence, we have to engage the Lions Youth Haven kids at risk program as well, so there is some access there too.

MS CARRICK: I am not taking away from what you are saying about having a hub or a support like that; that is great. But Yarralumla Nursery is an ACT government nursery. Doesn't it support Landcare groups? It has got staff.

Ms Franco: It has not got the good diversity of stock that we need, and I do not even know if it supplies for our projects.

Ms Hoefer: We got some lately for riparian planting; we got plants from there. With our little grants that we get, often if we need something, it is not available, so we are limited to the most common plants. And now there are changes with Greening Australia, that puts more pressure on there.

Ms Franco: I think Yarralumla might be the same. They want large orders, like 500, and most of our little groups want 20 here and there. I do not know if Yarralumla has got that restriction, but I certainly know our staff cannot get what they want. Very rarely do we use Yarralumla. I know they go to as many places as they can to get it.

MR RATTENBURY: Presumably, once you have called across all of your groups, that must provide a fair demand?

Ms Franco: Yes, massive. There are 90 groups in the ACT, and all of them at some point want to plant.

MR RATTENBURY: And how many volunteers does that reflect?

Ms Franco: Over a thousand.

Ms Hoefer: I do not know. We have a Christmas party every year where we definitely have 120 people coming, and how many people do not come to the Christmas party—

Ms Franco: They are just the convenors—

Ms Hoefer: That is a hard call. FrogWatch alone—we are not doing the ongoing work so much—has 200 volunteers every year going out at night in the cold to count frogs, as you know. It is amazing. We have lots of volunteers, too, who say, “I would love to go and pick the weeds, but my knees cannot do it anymore. I am not so sure-footed any more. I would love to work in a nursery.”

Another thing that I see is very often these big orders. To get a cheaper price—not a retail price but a cheaper price—we have to do big orders. So we get the big orders, but we do not have the capacity to keep them alive. We try our best, but we have one irrigation system and we have one little shade house, and that is it. Often that also means loss of plants. But we have to get them in these big batches, or then they are gone. So if they come in, we just have to order. We are between a rock and a hard place there. It would be great for the groups to know that there is a local provenance. That would be really good, absolutely.

MS CASTLEY: I am keen to keep talking about the budget, if I can. I have been away from the environment portfolio for a bit, so please bear with me. Your submission outlines that you do source around \$175,000 per year from other sources, including the commonwealth. Your local projects generate so many wonderful, positive externalities for the ACT government. I am wondering: how does that fit with what the ACT government provides, knowing that the commonwealth is willing to do a bunch of heavy lifting as well? Can you talk to me about the differences in the projects that you

do?

Ms Franco: I have been in this role for 12 years, and I write something like between 10 to 20 grants a year. You are in a much more competitive space in the commonwealth. Some years we have definitely had three or four times as much funding through the commonwealth than we get through the ACT government.

The consistency of funding is what is really important to us so that we do not lose our staff, we do not lose our capacity, and we do not lose some of the corporate knowledge we have got within our organisations. That is where the ACT government does not have to invest a lot in order to provide us consistent, safe funding to keep us going.

While the numbers can be a lot bigger for one-off events from the commonwealth, what the ACT government can do with a little bit of money is actually provide some very significant stability for our organisations in the community. But, yes, it is variable, and some years the commonwealth money dwindles. Last year, for instance, apart from the urban rivers program, which was a pretty decent sized program, nothing else came out. There was very little other competitive funding coming out, so we are vulnerable to what people's—

MS CASTLEY: It is consistency, isn't it. We hear it a lot.

Ms Franco: Yes, what people's interests are—

Ms Hoefler: And you can say many beautiful things come out, but at the end it comes to how much it is valued. How much is it valued by the ACT government as a core value to the health and wellbeing of people? That is the old story, isn't it—environment and put a price tag on this.

Now we see in the ACT budget that the amount of funding for the environment has gone down another per cent from 3 per cent for the environment to 2 per cent for the environment, and many of these funding streams that fall under that 2 per cent are actually nothing to do with on-ground environmental things. It is other agencies or other programs that are not directly related to on-ground work or environmental improvement. This is a big worry. We know the ACT government has a big budget to fulfil and to make work, but it seems that often small projects are really suffering the most for big budget questions. That feels a bit threatening.

MS CASTLEY: Yes. I think you answered my second question. As you say, they have all the great words but it is about putting your money where your mouth is. but as you say, all the great words but it is putting your money where your mouth is.

Ms Hoefler: Yes. We see that too, with a lot of our volunteers, who are highly skilled through their profession or their long-term commitment. We have worked on that relationship for a long time and we sit on a lot of reference groups and committees. The value of our volunteer knowledge is taken into account by the government in a way, if it suits.

Ms Franco: It is expected for us to engage.

Ms Hoefer: It is expected that we are there. Often, our volunteers make more informed decisions and point out issues and holes in plans, like planting plans, revegetation plans or anything, that have been done by highly-paid consultants—which is in no way like what we get in support. Our volunteers are the ones to pull it up and say, “Look at these plans.” We have a project currently in the Ginninderra catchment where almost half of the plants that were signed up for roadside verge planting are not suitable for that area. If it were not for one of our volunteers, who is highly skilled in grasslands management, it would not have been pulled up. This is so sad. We are toothless tigers in that way.

MS CASTLEY: Do you have flexibility to make a change to the government’s plans?

Ms Hoefer: If we are in the forum we can suggest but we cannot demand. The government may decide not to go with our suggestion. We have seen that in Umbagog National Park where a landscaper from Adelaide has a landscape plan but he does not know anything about the geology of this area and has never seen the plan. Then, if the local volunteer voice is not heard, the planting fails and it ends up being an expensive project with zero outcomes.

THE CHAIR: It sounds like you are really highlighting the value of local knowledge.

Ms Hoefer: Yes; thanks for summarising that.

MR CAIN: The Murrumbidgee River corridor has come up a few times in an ancillary way. But, in terms of the management of that important river and its corridor, what are your views on how best to manage it for long-term viability for richness and biodiversity but also being a part of our wonderful, blended bush environment and also for recreational use? Is the current management adequate to achieve those outcomes?

Ms Franco: It is the forgotten river in the ACT, really. I do not know if a lot of people actually understand that we have a really important river system in the ACT. So I think there is a big gap in knowledge about it, and there is equally a gap in government funding to support looking after the river corridor.

Weeds are a massive issue. If you said to me, “Here is \$50 million; where do you want it?” it would sink into the river in a minute to kill the weeds. There is a lot of work to be done in removing a lot of the weeds along the corridor. We have to remember that, because it is a corridor, it is transporting seed. So whatever you do in the corridor is going to travel downstream and affect areas of riparian zone through farmlands and other areas and into New South Wales as well.

Are we looking after it well enough? Honestly, I do not think we are putting the resources into it that we should be. Weeds are a major issue. Sedimentation is one of the biggest issues. We see quite a bit of turbidity along the river, and that is affecting the health of a lot of the aquatic species.

In terms of community engagement, like you mentioned earlier, it is not easily accessible. We have one group, which is called POSM, the Parkcarers of Southern Murrumbidgee. They have been operating for, I think, 20 years. They are a fantastic group. They are one of the stewardship groups that look after this little spot between Point Hut and Pine Island. I would love to see that group replicated all the way through

the Murrumbidgee in the ACT. We do not have enough capacity to be able to create those groups, but we would love to be able to do that and to get the community more engaged and to get recreational groups engaged as well. There are fishermen interested in the area and there are tracks that you can do bike riding along in some spots as well. I think we have some capacity to engage those more diverse groups and have them consider some of the environmental impacts along the river and try and help with some of the restoration works.

Ms Hoefler: Yes; I totally agree. We are seeing, especially with young people volunteering, that often they do not want to be so site specific. Our Landcare groups, for example, really like their spot and they go back there and they have that intimate relationship with that spot; whereas, young people have a different approach. They have that social aspect that is really important, and they are happy within a group where they feel safe to do activities.

So places like the Murrumbidgee corridor are prime suspects for being a target of these activities because you will require some travel. No-one lives right next to it. But with a big group—and we see that when we work with corporate groups—you can achieve so much in the education and also on ground and you have such high outcomes, which is really heartening. It is just that you need funding for this and the bums on the seats and the people power to help those groups and form these groups. It takes a lot of time—and you know this as politicians—to build relationships and have meaningful relationships and trust, and, for that, we need more support.

At the Ginninderra Creek corridor, we had an area that was impenetrable with weeds. One volunteer has, over the last three years, felled thousands of small suckers off the willows, all by hand because volunteers are not allowed to use power tools. So it is really tough. We have had help in the last year from the ACT government to take these little willows out. I walked that part yesterday for one and a half hours with the group convenor, and every single person that we walked past stopped us, and they use it now for walking. The kids came there and were looking at mushrooms and little bugs and beetles. People were walking their dogs. It is amazing what that one person has done with something that was impenetrable and unusable. Now, all of a sudden, people see the rakali and realise there is water. So we can do it.

Ms Franco: I would just add that the Upper Murrumbidgee River riparian zone in our catchment area in the ACT is actually on a lot of rural land. We engage a lot of rural landholders as well and do projects with them. Those relationships are really important. I think the ACT government struggles a little bit with those relationships, and partly it is about the land management agreements. I am not sure where they are up to but there has been a review of land management agreements along the Murrumbidgee. I think some of the leases say that the landholder has to manage the riparian zone but it can be removed from their lease at any point in time because it is part of the corridor.

That insecurity in that tenure can affect that relationship and whether the land manager wants to do work on that riparian zone or not, can get affected by that. But we work with them. Coming from community, they often want to work with us more than they want to work directly with ACT government land managers, because they feel like that is a bit more of a stick rather than a carrot. So there is opportunity for us to work with the land managers more on those areas.

THE CHAIR: We will have to wind up, but one of the key messages I am hearing is that we cannot afford to take our hands off the zero intervention approach. Thank you very much for all of your time. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice—and I am not sure you have—please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you.

Short suspension.

BOWLES, DR DEVIN, Chief Executive Officer, ACTCOSS

BUCHANAN, MR GEOFFREY JOHN, Policy Advocacy and Business Development Director, CARE Financial

DOBSON, MS CORINNE, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Shelter

PIPPEN, MS DEBORAH, Research and Policy Coordinator, Shelter ACT

THE CHAIR: We welcome witnesses from ACT Shelter, CARE Financial and ACTCOSS. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will proceed straight to questions. I am interested in the government's decision to not fund the rent relief program. I am very interested to find out from any of you what you consider the real-world, on-the-ground impacts of that might be.

Mr Buchanan: I am happy to start, as CARE is the organisation that has been delivering the Rent Relief Fund on behalf of the ACT government since 17 April 2023. We have also been talking with other community sector organisations. We put a joint submission into the budget process that had 16 other organisations sign on, and a number of those were organisations that would refer clients to CARE to apply for or access the Rent Relief Fund. From that perspective, they have now lost what they have described as a vital form of support for people, providing a unique form of financial relief that is not available through any other source now. The concern that CARE has, as well as what we have heard from other organisations, is that that will create an increased demand for services and supports.

The challenge will be: where do you direct those people to find the assistance that they need to maintain or stabilise their tenancy? From our perspective and from what we have been hearing from organisations like Woden Community Service and Vinny's, that is the biggest benefit that the Rent Relief Fund has provided for their clients—a temporary relief measure that has provided a period of stabilisation for people who have experienced rental stress or severe financial hardship.

Ms Dobson: The concern has been raised by a number of people working in the sector, knowing that they already have quite significant pressure on their services—those people who are supporting those in rental stress and facing homelessness. As Geoff said, it provides a really important way that people can stabilise their situation. They often get referred to other supports and so on. It is a temporary measure, but it can prevent a person's situation from escalating further. It can mean that they avoid homelessness and all the other consequent issues that come along with that.

So I think it was a really short-sighted measure. We know that other states and territories have similar financial assistance schemes for people. So we do not understand why the ACT, which is one of the most unaffordable jurisdictions for people on low incomes and people on income support, is not continuing this scheme.

THE CHAIR: It seems to me that it would exacerbate housing instability—you have used the word “stability”—which could well have other flow-on problems.

Mr Bowles: Looking at it in terms of a financial investment, we viewed the Rent Relief Fund as an excellent investment for a few reasons. The first is that keeping people in their homes has, we think, reduced overall pressure on public and community housing more broadly. It is a less expensive measure to keep someone in the private market than to fund community housing to house them, and often this is the bridge that people need. The second reason is that keeping people out of homelessness, recognising that there are significant waitlists, is a good investment because, once people become homeless, things like their emergency healthcare costs—costs that the ACT government bears—are likely to go up significantly.

The third reason is that the community sector as a whole works with a number of clients—and I think Mr Buchanan’s opening remark on this really bears this out—who are looking to increase stability in their lives after a period of disruption, whether that be from domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drugs, parenting issues or whatever, it often comes down to trying to regain stability. Housing stability is an absolute bedrock for that. For the community sector to be able to point people to a program that will help them find greater stability in their housing situation often enables greater impact from other programs from the community sector or indeed delivered by government. It is hard to address a number of issues like domestic or family violence or alcohol and other drug issues if your housing is unstable or, indeed, you are becoming homeless.

MR RATTENBURY: Can you tell us roughly how many people benefited from the scheme in the period it was open?

Mr Buchanan: Over the whole course of the scheme, from 17 April 2023 through to when it closed on 4 July this year, 2025, we had approved 1,609 grants through the program. We did the calculations and that equated to two grants being provided every day over that 27-month period.

MR RATTENBURY: And that helped people maintain their tenancies?

Mr Buchanan: Yes. Especially as part of a whole system of tenancy support, it provided one very vital part of that support in terms of allowing people to cover up to four weeks of their rent at a maximum of \$2,500 to maintain their tenancy.

MR RATTENBURY: Did you have any consultation with government ahead of the decision to end the Rent Relief Fund?

Mr Buchanan: We had engaged in terms of having met with the Attorney-General, who was the minister looking after the scheme, in January this year as kind of an introductory meeting where we raised the Rent Relief Fund as one of our key budget priorities for the next upcoming budget. We were getting indications that it was very unlikely and that there was possibly already a decision that had been made to cease the fund.

We followed up over the following months with Minister Stephen-Smith after she made a ministerial statement on the cost of living in the Assembly which referred to the Rent Relief Fund as being one of the important measures that had been introduced by the

government previously. We also wrote a letter to the Attorney-General and to the Treasurer with Woden Community Service after we had gotten the indication that the view was that there were other tenancy supports available and that this was not needed anymore. Whereas, when we went to Woden Community Service, they were saying that 60 per cent of their clients had been referred for a Rent Relief Fund grant. We thought that that would flag the need to maybe look back at what the purpose and the importance of the fund was. But requests for meetings were not responded to with an invitation to come and meet with those ministers after that.

MR RATTENBURY: Just on that last point about other sources, the Treasurer has said publicly in response to the scrapping of this program that there are other cost-of-living measures available to people and therefore this is not needed. Do you have any insight as to what those other measures are?

Mr Buchanan: I do not. I have heard reference to the electricity, gas and water rebate and I have talked about the tenancy supports that are available that are non-financial—they are informational and legal assistance. I have not seen one that is specifically filling the gap that is now created by the cessation of the Rent Relief Fund.

MR EMERSON: On siloed decision-making—this goes to what Dr Bowles indicated—there is the impact of this measure on housing, which comes under Minister Berry. On health, it comes under Minister Stephen-Smith. On family and domestic violence, it comes under Minister Pettersson. On community services, it comes under Minister Orr, and there are the emergency measures that come under the Attorney-General. Is there a solve for this kind of decision-making where it looks like, within that portfolio, it makes sense to fund it, but, if you broaden it out, it does not make any sense at all? That is something that the community sector sees. This is a general frustration. Is there anyone doing this well in other jurisdictions in Australia or across the world that you can point to as a recommendation to us?

Ms Dobson: Are you asking whether, in other jurisdictions, there are ways to do this better, to make decisions better?

MR EMERSON: Yes.

Ms Dobson: I suspect that there are. I probably cannot go into specific detail about it, off the top of my head. Certainly, one issue in this space is that we do not have mechanisms to engage with the sector and provide input into decision-making around housing. There is a joint pathways group which provides some input in the homelessness space, although it is very much specifically defined homelessness services. For example, Care are not engaged with that; legal assistance services are not engaged. There is limited engagement with domestic and family violence.

The ACT has a housing strategy. Initially, when that was set up, there was a consultative group, but that is no longer the case. I cannot recall the last time that it met. There were advisory groups for the growth and renewal program. I cannot recall when they last met.

A concern is that there are not structured or regular opportunities for government to consult with the sector, and for the sector to perhaps flag what the issues are—if the

government are considering a particular way of doing things, like cutting a program—and for services to raise concerns and issues around that. It seems that decisions are made, and we get down the track to a point like this, where we are trying to get a program reinstated, and a decision has been made that we think will have a number of spin-off implications that are not good for people facing housing insecurity or homelessness.

Dr Bowles: If I can elaborate a little on that answer, there are some systemic issues around how government makes decisions on investing taxpayer funding. It is very reasonable that government wants to make sure that there is good value in that investment. One of the issues with budget processes overall—and this is not unique to the ACT—is that the cost savings of a number of social measures often do cross portfolio boundaries and are difficult to quantify.

It does not take a rocket scientist to know that if a person is not housed, they will, on average, cost a lot more for the emergency department and require a number of additional programs, which will cost money. But being able to model that in a way that is in accordance with Treasury specifications ahead of a budget is difficult. The ACT government and many governments therefore err on the side of underinvestment, because they do not have an adequate understanding of the savings that are delivered by social programs.

There are some ways around this. One is getting a better understanding of some of that cross-pollination with data that cuts across typical silos. New Zealand has elements of this, at least—quite strongly, in some areas. In the ACT, as the ACT government seeks to develop its own data capability, there is a real risk that the community sector's insights and information will not be seen as sophisticated; therefore the bias against community service investment will be exacerbated.

There are ways of tweaking the budget process and also funding community services to do more evaluation work, which is funding that the community sector very rarely gets, which would enable and provide justification for some of that cross-silo interaction that needs to happen if taxpayers are genuinely going to get the best value for money.

MR RATTENBURY: I want to ask Shelter ACT: you have flagged concerns with your funding. When I asked the minister about this in question time, she indicated you have a surplus of funds from earlier years. I was a little surprised by this answer. Can you explain this to me?

Ms Dobson: We do not have a substantial surplus of funds. Like any viable not-for-profit, you do have some retained earnings that you carry over from year to year so that, if you go into deficit, you are able to cover your costs. We have never been funded at a level in our core funding that supports the peak bodies. There was a point when we had some funding from the federal government, as well as the ACT government funding. When the feds pulled out of that, other states and territories stepped in to fill the shortfall, but the ACT government never did. We have been under-resourced for a number of years.

In 2019, an agreement was made to go some way towards rectifying that situation. We

got what was called a strengthening systemic advocacy grant so that we could have a full-time CEO. We were not able to employ a full-time CEO at that point. We did not have an office, and we were able to open an office. That grant finished in June last year. We did have some retained earnings from the earlier part of the period of that grant, because there was some time in which we had to employ additional staff and so on, and we have used that over the last financial year so that we can keep operating. But we are operating with a very large deficit, and we are currently in the process of looking at scaling back staffing and potentially closing our office.

Generally, the scale and range of issues that we are looking at in the housing and homelessness space in the ACT are significant, and they have very profound social and economic implications. It is really hard, as a peak body, to be effectively advocating in that space and providing that informed input when you are just not funded to do so.

MS CARRICK: My question is about homelessness and homelessness services. Since I have been doing this job, I have been lucky enough to go around with Vinnies and Salvos to see the services that they provide. I have learned that there are not so many services in the south. Samaritan House is fantastic. My question is: could we do with another Samaritan House facility somewhere else, potentially in the south? I do see plenty of homeless people out there.

Ms Dobson: Speaking more broadly about what services we have available, whether they meet the need, and the distribution of them, we have concerns that the ACT government has not done the mapping, in order to understand what services are available, where they are distributed and where there are unmet needs. We did see in this budget, and we did welcome, a continuation of existing funding for most homelessness services. There were a few where it is still a bit unclear as to what is happening with their funding.

While we welcome that, we did not see any attempt to perhaps address some of the gaps that we know are there. Services have also reported having an increased complexity of need. There is a significant level of need in the community, and they are struggling to keep up with that. While we did see the continuation of funding, like other community sector services, the indexation that services receive actually has not kept up with all the costs of operations. In effect, in real terms, organisations are lagging behind, while that level of need is increasing.

There is a need to look at the funding that is provided to homelessness services. I agree that there is a need to have more crisis accommodation and other forms of early intervention, and to look at how that is distributed. There is a case for looking at that transparently and engaging with the sector and the community to understand that, so that we can make informed funding decisions. I feel that, at the moment, that has not been done sufficiently.

MS TOUGH: My question is a fairly broad one. I am interested in how the timing of the ACT budget affects decisions made by the community sector each year.

Dr Bowles: Being so close to the end of the financial year means that often community service organisations, which are the partners of government in service delivery, do not have adequate time to plan for the coming year. That means organisations are left not

knowing whether they will have to retract or diminish services. That has profound implications because it leads to loss of staff. Also, it often means that, with the transitions for clients, where funding does cease, it does not allow the time that is required for those transitions to be as effective as possible. Bringing forward the budget would enable the government to get more money for its investment in the community sector.

Ms Dobson: I will echo that. We know that, with respect to the recent budget, a number of services had a really challenging situation where they have had people come into their services with intense needs. These are the services that might provide some ongoing support, and they could not take people in because they do not know whether they have funding after 1 July.

We struggle in our sector in terms of workforce, in terms of retention and attracting people to work in this sector, when people do not know whether they will have a job beyond 1 July, and you cannot provide that certainty. It is predominantly a feminised workforce as well. We lose people from the sector, and it is very hard to retain people. Often these are quite challenging roles. They can be rewarding, but when you have that perpetual uncertainty about whether you will have a job, and whether you can continue to support the people that are seeking your services, it is an enormous issue. We raise this issue every year. Can we please address that issue for services?

MS CLAY: How many Canberrans are experiencing homelessness at the moment?

Ms Dobson: I should have that statistic here now, but I do not. There is a little bit of a challenge with what we use to measure that. Obviously, census data becomes less timely. We often use data for the specialist homelessness services sector, and there is access from OneLink that is a proxy. Not everyone who is homeless goes to a service. That service data certainly provides an indication, and we do see that it fluctuates, but it is consistently relatively high.

We see certain cohorts—this is from the service data—where we see over-representation. I would certainly say that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are vastly over-represented in that data, and particularly for chronic homelessness. The ACT consistently, for many years, has had the highest rates of chronic homelessness jurisdictionally. I am happy to take that as a question on notice, if need be, but I do not actually have the statistics here.

MS CLAY: You do not need to take it on notice. With the overall number of Canberrans who are experiencing homelessness, and maybe some of the cohorts, is that number going up or down over time, or staying the same? We might draw some conclusions about whether the government is doing a good job, depending on where those figures are heading.

Ms Dobson: There is some fluctuation through the year, which is fairly standard, but it is not decreasing. In terms of whether it is increasing, I am not aware that it has increased substantially. I would have to take that on notice. I want to be a bit careful about saying something that is not quite right. I think there may have been an increase in rough sleepers, but there are some other particular cohorts where we can probably see that there have been some increases. I would probably want to take that one on

notice.

MS CLAY: If it is not too much trouble, it might be useful to see where it is getting worse. That would be very helpful.

Ms Dobson: Sure, to the extent that we can. There is a lot of focus on rough sleepers because they are so visible, but there are other forms of homelessness that sometimes are not as visible and not as easy to track. Certainly, we can look at what data there is.

MS CLAY: Are our services in that sector seeing an increase in demand for their services? Are there more people who need to use homelessness services and some of those community supports?

Ms Dobson: I would say many report that. I do not want to speak for all of those. I know there has been an increase at times in young people. We see certain groups where, certainly, there is increased need. If we look at some of the other service systems, I know that, with legal assistance services, most of their clients are homeless. With people who are often seeking support from other service systems, there is a very high rate of homelessness amongst those groups. I am sorry; what was the original question?

MS CLAY: No, you got there—whether there is an increase in demand for services in the community sector; it might indicate that we have a higher need.

Ms Dobson: What we have heard is also around the complexity of need. There is a substantial complexity of need that is often very challenging in the current context of diminished funding and services across the board struggling to support people who have that complexity of need. They are also often not able to access public housing because they might have a whole range of other issues, which means that they cannot get onto the priority waiting list, because you have to demonstrate that those issues have been stabilised before you are accepted onto that list.

MS BARRY: I have a question around maintenance of public housing. I know that that is a significant issue. I want to get your views on whether the budget appropriately addresses the issues around maintenance of social and public housing.

Ms Dobson: That is a good question. We did not see any additional funding in this budget. We have some questions about the funding that had been provisioned in previous budgets. It looked to us as though there might have been a reduction in that, and it might have been reallocated. I think there are some questions for government in terms of whether they have actually reallocated previous funding.

There was some investment in previous budgets, which we welcomed, and we anticipated that that would continue to grow in subsequent budgets. There is a significant backlog in repairs and maintenance. This has been an area of underinvestment for years, if not decades. We continue to hear from public housing tenants who are living in conditions that are not acceptable. There are significant maintenance repair issues that go unaddressed. There are accessibility issues, and we need to see upgrades to some of the existing stock.

It is a concern for us around the question of whether sufficient funding has been

allocated for this. There needs to be transparency regarding how funding is being expended and how it is being used. It is very opaque in terms of what is actually going on. We would welcome a bit more transparency around that as well.

Dr Bowles: I would like to highlight the importance of that question. As many people that are home owners would know, it is important to maintain a property in terms of investment, so that it remains a good investment and so that little problems do not become much more costly problems. This is not just an issue about the health and reasonable comfort of people in public housing, although those considerations are important; it is also about acknowledging that one of the ACT government's largest asset classes is public housing, and making sure that that is well maintained is an excellent investment.

I note that having a good set of processes and sufficient investment so that housing is maintained creates a virtuous cycle whereby tenants feel respected and are therefore willing to invest more in maintenance of the properties themselves.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. 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*. Thank you very much.

BARRY, MS ERIN, Director, Policy and Evaluation, Youth Coalition of the ACT
WATTS, MS HANNAH, Chief Executive Officer, Youth Coalition of the ACT

THE CHAIR: We welcome witnesses from the Youth Coalition of the ACT. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. My question is fairly broad and it ties into youth mental health but also the general undercurrent. I grapple with the fact that, apparently, I am no longer part of youth.

Ms Watts: Me too!

MR RATTENBURY: The pain is real!

THE CHAIR: There is a very valuable contribution. What I really want to understand is: in your experience, what are younger people feeling at the moment; what are they grappling with and what are they concerned about in general? That is a very broad question.

Ms Watts: It is a very broad question. It depends on the demographic of young people that we are talking about. Obviously, the concerns of a 12-year-old are going to be different to those of a 16-, 17- or 25-year-old. In general, but particularly the older demographic of young people, they are struggling with the same things that all of us who think we are still young are grappling with: how am I going to pay my rent or my mortgage; how am I going to afford groceries; how am I going to pay for insurance increases? There are all those sorts of things. Young people, such as adolescents and those in their late teens and early 20s—a time that all of us in this room have gone through and grappled with—think: what is our place in the world; how will we be able to sustain ourselves in the world that we are growing in and make a positive impact; how will we learn, grow, move out of home and get housing? There are all those sorts of things.

Young people feel many of the same issues that we do, but they have not had the experience that many of us have had, knowing that things are okay. That is where some of the impacts of mental health really come through for young people. They often do not receive a message of hope from the community. With the issues that they are facing, the things that they are primarily concerned about, it is fair enough to feel that there is not a lot of hope. There is not a lot of hope for young people in terms of the housing market, sometimes in terms of employment stability, and in terms of being able to access the health services that they need or the mental health services that they need. That is just looking at the local things that are happening, not the broader picture and issues of climate change, political instability and what is going on in the world.

In our role as a peak body, we cannot do everything. We are a small organisation, as many of the ACT peak bodies are, so we really try to focus on the areas where we can have an impact and that we know are not necessarily being looked at systemically for young people in the way that other things are. We try to focus on issues like education, housing and homelessness, and mental health. Those are some of the key issues, and then there are issues such as the minimum age of criminal responsibility and supports

for young people in out-of-home care. We really focus on the social issues. That is what we try to do to make sure that the concerns of all young people are heard, but particularly the young people who do not have a voice and do not have the supports that they need. That was a very long answer. I am sorry; I will try to not do that the whole time. You got me on my soapbox!

Ms Barry: To add to the conversation around youth mental health, there is new research coming through around the impact of global megatrends on this generation of young people. That compounds the message of there not being hope for young people, regarding climate change, intergenerational inequality, and, as Hannah talked about, housing and employment, and also the impact of the global political environment. All of this was captured in a recent report that was developed for the ACT by Prevention United. It is called *ACT-ing upstream*. It looks at promotion and prevention of poor mental health in the ACT. It is important to bring it into this conversation, because, when we are talking about young people and mental health and what we can do upstream to prevent poor mental health in young people, we have to acknowledge that we actually cannot outrun some of the global megatrends. That changes the conversation, because it is about: what can we do and what is within our power to do within local communities to support promotion and prevention of poor mental health?

THE CHAIR: From what you are saying, it sounds like there is a sense of disempowerment in general among young people facing those megatrends.

Ms Barry: I think that young people have a lot of hope. Some of these global megatrends set a context that adds additional challenges, but young people are incredibly creative, optimistic and have lots of fantastic ideas about what they need to support their own mental health. I was listening to the conversation you had this morning with the mental health panel. There was a kind of tension around: do we focus at the acute end or do we focus at the upstream end? To be honest, I think the answer is both. We always need to do both, and that makes it a difficult economic conversation to have. For young people in the ACT, it is around: how do we support them in their local communities to have a sense of belonging; how do we invest in community development in local areas to support them to connect with other young people as well? I think all of those things are within our power as a jurisdiction. We do not then stop acknowledging the impact of some of the global circumstances on young people.

MISS NUTTALL: I would love to chat about youth homelessness. Your budget submission recommends that the ACT government conducts a systematic and collaborative needs and assets assessment of the ACT youth housing and homelessness system to understand the system's opportunities and constraints. Part of that is sector mapping. I am really interested in the impact the current lack of sector mapping of the youth homelessness and support landscape is having on young people who are trying to find secure housing.

Ms Watts: Around this time last year, we saw a change in youth homelessness services as a result of homelessness sector commissioning. Obviously, our area is looking at the youth homelessness sector. Prior to that, we were quite vocal, over a number of years, around the need for system mapping. I note that was previously brought up by a Corinne at Shelter. This is a whole homelessness sector issue, as well as a youth homelessness issue. The result of that mapping not being done in a way that would have been really

helpful in the lead-up to the commissioning, in terms of a practical response, is that, for example, in the changeover last year, we lost six crisis accommodation beds. We had 24 crisis accommodation beds and that has now gone down to 18. The reason for that is that providing crisis accommodation requires more support and, therefore, more finances and investment in that service for the young people who are there. That level of investment is not there, so six of those beds were moved from crisis to transition accommodation, meaning that we have lost six crisis beds.

Another impact that happened is that, as a result of the loss of some of the services through that commissioning process, we have homelessness services in the ACT that are not just funded by the ACT government. An example of that is the Raw Potential program, which is entirely philanthropically funded. It is an incredible program that does a lot of really intensive outreach support for young people who are experiencing homelessness. They have 1½ staff members working for them, so it is not a huge program or organisation. Until the commissioning process, they never had a waiting list for the case management support that they were able to provide. Within, I think, six weeks of the commissioning process changing and some of those programs no longer existing, they had a waitlist of over six months. That was simply because we did not understand that, in closing down some programs, there was going to be a gap and did not understand who was going to fill that gap.

Overall, we need to look at the assets that we have, the state of the system now, what gaps have emerged as a result of commissioning or just as a result of the increased need for young people, and also whether our assets are meeting the needs of young people. When I talk about crisis accommodation or even our transitional housing, a lot of the beds that are provided are in share houses and share places, which we know is not the best response for young people. Young people who come to homelessness services have often experienced significant trauma, and having to move into, essentially, a share house, where they may have a case manager who is helping them and supporting them, is not necessarily the best thing for a lot of these young people. So we need to look at: what are the assets that we have, what needs are those assets meeting, what is missing, and what do we need to put in place? That may be additional beds or that may be additional outreach and prevention services or other things. I can tell you the number of beds, the number of things that are out there, but, in terms of what we need, we do not have that.

MISS NUTTALL: So the demand side mapping is really crucial in this too.

Ms Watts: Yes, and understanding how the services that we have are meeting those demands or how are they not meeting those demands. There are opportunities for the services that exist to adapt. It does not necessarily mean dumping millions of dollars into something. Of course, more funding is needed and always welcome, but I do not think throwing money at this situation is the solution, and there is no money to throw at it anyway. I think we can be smarter about the way that we do that, but, in order to do that, we need this mapping done to really understand what the needs are.

MISS NUTTALL: I have heard a couple of organisations suggest the idea of a youth homelessness strategy. Do you think that is the kind of thing that would work to cohesively pull this piece of work together?

Ms Watts: I think the mapping would need to be done to help inform a strategy. A strategy would be great, but we need to make sure that we really understand what the needs are now and ideally predict that into the future to help inform the strategy, so that we can then implement the strategy and make it better.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MS CARRICK: I am a little confused. I thought that is what the commissioning process was all about: to identify the needs of a particular sector and then determine what services would meet the needs. Maybe that is a comment. I do not know. Has the commissioning worked?

Ms Watts: The commissioning process allowed us to look at what some of the needs are, but the end of a commissioning process should not be: “Here are all the new services and funding. Off you go. We’ll see you again in 10 years when it’s time to recommission.” We recently met with representatives from ACT Housing around what the next steps are. One of the challenges that we have in this space is that the data that is collected is not necessarily representative of the need. For example, if ACT Housing is not able to collect data from the services that they do not fund, then they are not necessarily seeing the need that is coming through for the philanthropically funded services or the federally funded services. It is really hard, even for ACT Housing, to get a picture of what is needed if they can only rely on the data that is there. So conversations with the sector are really important, and we will have those ongoing conversations. The Youth Coalition plays an important role in facilitating this work between the government and the sector.

THE CHAIR: I have a niggling question around commissioning which keeps coming up: is it really reasonable to expect a bureaucrat to be able to understand the entire system change and the dynamics that will happen in need if you stop funding one service and put more money into another? And is it actually possible to fully model that entire scenario at all?

Ms Watts: I do not know whether it is possible to do it all fully. I think we can do it better than we have been. I have spent a fair amount of time working in this space, and I still feel like I learn things every time I meet with services, have conversations and look at the data. I think we can do that better than we have been.

THE CHAIR: I have not seen a commissioning process go well at the back end, and then they tend to flow through.

MS CARRICK: My question is about education. In high schools, is there enough support for kids who are suffering from trauma? In addition, I would like to better understand the Muliyan program and its issues—why the number has gone down and why they cannot find accommodation. They are bright kids, but they are traumatised and they might be acting up. Is there enough support for them?

Ms Watts: My very short answer to that is no, there is not enough support. Schools are in a really difficult position. We expect a lot from them. Schools are meant to be places of learning and, in an ideal world, the community that we are bringing up our kids in is able to support them with their mental health needs, their housing needs, and all the

things that are going on in their life, in a way that allows them to turn up to school to focus on what they want to learn and then go home. But, unfortunately, we do not live in that blue-sky world; we live in a community and a society where there are many challenges that some of our young people are facing. Schools are incredibly important protective factors for young people. They are places that young people turn up every day and they are visible to their teachers and the school staff. It is really important that schools are resourced enough to see where things are going wrong for a young person or where there are challenges in their family, that we are able to put those supports in place and that schools are able to work with community and government support services to engage with children to participate in education.

Our schools are not able to do that at the moment. There is opportunity for schools to be able to do that. But I think there is a bigger picture: what are we asking our schools to do? Are we asking schools to teach literacy and numeracy? Are we asking school staff to deal with highly traumatised young people or young people who are being impacted by mental health or domestic violence? We are asking all of those things, so let's make sure that we are resourcing the schools to be able to do those things enough.

I will segue briefly to talk about Muliyan. Muliyan is a flexible education program that supports young people—primarily young people around grade 9 and 10 who are not able to engage in school. It is one of the flexible education programs that we have in the ACT. It has been running for a number of years with great success for the young people who attend. One of the challenges that they have is around infrastructure, and we raised that in our budget submission and response. We really need a place for these young people to attend school in a way that allows them to re-engage with education and the education process safely, so that they can plan to transition back to the primary school that they would usually attend.

But there is a broader picture of the need for flexible education as well. We need to make sure that we are looking at these sorts of options for young people in primary school, where these issues are emerging, and whether that is about providing extra supports in primary schools or at school sites, and whether it is about providing flexible education programs. I think that is an area in which we are significantly behind, in terms of addressing the needs of the broader population and individual students in that space.

MS TOUGH: My question also touches on youth mental health and the broader experience of young people in Canberra. We are now a few years past the COVID lockdown. We are five years on from COVID hitting and it has been quite a few years since the last lockdown and when restrictions were in place. Is there any noticeable impact on Canberra's youth from this—what youth in that cohort are currently experiencing compared to what those of us at this table may have experienced when we were young? And is there any noticeable difference in age groups within the youth cohort, regarding how they are dealing with those changes?

Ms Watts: Erin spoke to some of the global megatrends that we are seeing in this space. The impact of COVID is one of the things that sit in this space really well. In terms of young people, we are primarily looking at young people in the ages of 12 to 25—the high school age. What we are seeing now in that space is young people whose primary school experiences were impacted by COVID. There are things like school anxiety and their ability to make and maintain friendships and social connections and their ability

to focus in class. We are seeing those impacts coming through and we expect that will continue. This is also going to have an impact on the children who were in kindergarten and year 1 and were not able to attend at those really formative development years. You cannot make that up when they are seven or eight, because their brains have been wired in certain ways. So we are going to continue to see the impacts of COVID in young people for another decade, in the way that they engage with schools and systems.

Ms Barry: In the older age group of young people, we see it play out in a different way. We know that those who were going into year 9, year 10 and college through the COVID phase and are now entering early adulthood have higher rates of loneliness and social isolation than, I believe, any other age group in the ACT. That has been supported through the research by the Health Research Institute at the UC. We are seeing that play out in different ways for those different cohorts. For the older age group, it comes back to need: how do we support young adults around building a sense of belonging in their local community?

Ms Watts: This is where we get into a tricky situation sometimes. We need the funding for when things have gone wrong and people are in a state of distress. We also need to make sure that young people are being supported in their abilities to build social connections and things like that. That will mean that they can be deterred away from some of the impacts of that.

MS TOUGH: That was going to be my follow-up. If we can see these issues happening, where are the points at which we should be helping young people so we do not end up with severe mental ill-health down the track because of changes in society?

Ms Barry: Absolutely. It comes back to the point again: ultimately acting upstream is the most valuable and helpful way to prevent poor mental health. We also need to invest in our mental health systems and in acute services as well to support young people in distress. There is some really exciting work happening through the University of Canberra. They are piloting a program looking at supporting young people aged 18 to 30 to build social connections with each other. They are looking at how to do that by supporting community development and empowering people to build their own connections. We are in a quite exciting place at the moment, where we are able to learn from those programs and think about what that looks like in other parts of Canberra, and what we need to do within government and the community to support that connection elsewhere.

MISS NUTTALL: Your budget submission identifies a gap in mental health support for people with an intellectual disability, where they can access community paediatric services up to the age of 12. Am I right in assuming that there is nothing in terms of dedicated mental health support until they are 18?

Ms Barry: This is referring specifically to the CAMHS program, around people with mental health and intellectual disability. My understanding is that people are able to access that from the age of 17, but, due to waiting lists, they are not likely to get in until around the age of 18. There are other supports available for children up to the age of 12, so we see a gap emerging for young people in that 12 to 17 age group, where they are not able to access that additional program. My understanding is that it is a consultant service, so it is about being able to access a specialist consultancy as a kind of add-on

to the other mental health support that they are receiving. In our view, as an existing program, being able to bring down that age eligibility and lowering the threshold around the eligibility criteria is potentially a way to support an age group that is not currently being supported through that service.

MISS NUTTALL: That is really helpful to know. Thank you. That answers it.

MS BARRY: We know that young people experience domestic and family violence differently. Sometimes they are not the receiver of domestic and family violence but have witnessed domestic and family violence. Is there anything in the budget that addresses the gap around providing that specialised counselling service specifically for young people—not on the part of the parent or the mother but specifically for young people? Is there anything that addresses that need?

Ms Watts: I do not think there was a specific budget initiative announced this year. I have been running domestic and family violence training all day today, so the impact of this on young people is very fresh on my mind. The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Office is doing a bunch of work around a strategy for domestic and family violence, and we are quite involved in the work that is happening in that space. The specialist DFV sector is really aware of the impact on young people, the importance of the voices of young people and children being heard in this space, and their unique needs being acknowledged. We are seeing progress in the sector, in government and in society more broadly. At this stage, it is a bit of a watch-and-see situation: let's see what comes out of the strategy and how young people will be supported in that. We need to make sure that we invest in whatever the needs and the recommendations are, in terms of the support that young people need into the future.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your attendance today. 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*.

Short suspension.

LAMB, MS JESSICA, Acting Manager, Policy and Research, Health Care Consumers Association

THE CHAIR: We welcome our witness from the Health Care Consumers Association. Please note that, as a witness, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. I might kick off. Your budget submission makes a pretty wide range of recommendations, and I wonder if you could begin by sharing your perspective about what the biggest health challenges are in the ACT and any actions that you think that we need to take in that respect.

Ms Lamb: There are a wide variety of issues that affect ACT consumers when it comes to health services. We all recognise the challenges of funding the wish list of services that exist in the delivery of health services. I think one of the biggest issues, though, is the huge and growing backlog of outpatient appointments and elective surgery et cetera. That is an issue that is not going away, and it really needs some concerted effort to actually find a solution that is possible within the ACT's budget but also provides people with the health care that they need.

THE CHAIR: Looking to the longer term, as you try and think about this from a consumer perspective, do you think that we are doing enough now to prepare for the challenges that are coming down the pipeline?

Ms Lamb: I would say that, up until now, we have not done anything proactive to innovate within our health system. We have fiddled around the edges and changed approaches to things in minor ways, but we are going to keep having this tsunami of need. The needs are getting more complex, the population is growing and the costs of providing the kinds of health care that are available to people now are also growing.

I think it has been a good start with this budget, allocating the \$13 million to actually undertake some transformation processes. It is probably a little behind the eight ball but I think it is very necessary. It is good to see that we are attempting to do something in that respect now.

MS CASTLEY: I have a question about the community sector funding with regard to the challenges that you have outlined. Do you think that the government is doing enough in helping the community sector face the challenges that we are seeing now?

Ms Lamb: I think we all appreciate the two-year boost that is included in the budget, but I think the compounding issues of under-funding over a long period of time means that we probably need to go back to the drawing board and look at how we are funding and how we are indexing that funding for the community sector. I think the community sector has a lot to offer in the health sector and in the community sector, and working together will probably provide a better outcome for consumers and also a cheaper outcome for the government if they can work more effectively with those services that do exist.

MR RATTENBURY: I note in your budget submission that you talk about long wait times for publicly available dental services in the ACT. Did you see anything in the budget that improves that situation?

Ms Lamb: No. We saw some performance indicators in the budget which suggest that we are aiming for a wait time of under 12 months, but I did not see anything in the budget that actually provides a boost to those services to actually achieve that. We are certainly not achieving that now, and I cannot see anything in this budget that creates a situation where we will actually be making a dent in that waiting list.

MR RATTENBURY: You talked about the fact that public dental care in the ACT can attract a co-payment per session. You noted a maximum of \$515 across the course of treatment. I think that has increased in the budget to \$550, by the looks of it. Do you see this being a barrier to people accessing dental services? Is that the point you were drawing out there?

Ms Lamb: Yes, absolutely. That is right.

MR RATTENBURY: Do you know the policy rationale for the application of that co-payment?

Ms Lamb: Sorry; no I do not. I could go away and look into it but I—

MR RATTENBURY: No; that is all right. We can ask. I just thought you might know, but that is okay.

Ms Lamb: It would be good to know, but I do not.

MR RATTENBURY: Thank you. The budget includes \$27 million for chronic disease management and prevention. Do you know of any of the specific details of what this funding will be used for or were you consulted in the putting together of that particular initiative?

Ms Lamb: I do not know where it will be targeted or how that has been decided, if it has been decided. That is not something we have been actively involved in. We do run the Chronic Conditions Network, which is a group of organisations supporting ACT residents with chronic conditions. I think that would be a great place to start talking about that if the government wanted to have that conversation.

MS CARRICK: The Health Consumer Network referred a fair bit to more allied health support in the community at low or no cost. There are a range of organisations that wanted, for example, hydrotherapy. I think it was mentioned that, even with the opening of the Tuggeranong Hydrotherapy Pool, there would not be enough. How could we get more allied health into the community? I suppose the government funding it, but—

Ms Lamb: That is a good question. There are a lot of opportunities there for collaboration with the community sector. A lot of these chronic conditions organisations have a good depth of knowledge. They often employ their own nursing staff—actually, all sorts of different allied health staff. I think the government could leverage relationships with those organisations to achieve outreach into the community

in a more affordable and effective way, utilising the great expertise that is out there that has been attempting to do this perhaps without the support that they need to reach the scale of the need the ACT community actually experiences.

MS TOUGH: In your budget submission you talk about making sure the community and the sector is ready for the implementation of voluntary assisted dying later this year. I was just wondering if you could touch on what specifically you think still needs some work and where that work could go.

Ms Lamb: I think at this stage work is well advanced in terms of implementation, given that it is starting in November. But I think there is still a big opportunity for us to provide an education piece to the community sector more generally, to support groups, the public and consumers, so that they understand what is being provided, how it works, what it means and how to access it. I think there are still a lot of misconceptions in the community about what it might mean for them. Providing an outreach is really important in terms of that education piece.

MS TOUGH: Thank you. That makes sense.

THE CHAIR: We have heard a bit over time about people having to travel for different treatments interstate. I am wondering if you have looked at the impact on healthcare consumers of having to seek treatment outside of the area that they live in.

Ms Lamb: We very specifically did a research project around the impact on families with children who need to travel to receive paediatric care interstate, and I would be very happy to share our research piece on that with you. The impacts are quite significant in terms of disruption to daily lives, separating families and costs. The IPTAAS funding is not really fit for purpose at this stage. It is very minimal. The hoops that families have to jump through to access it are quite significant and are a real barrier. These are stressed families dealing with very difficult situations and we ask them to do a lot to access that funding—and, when they get it, it is \$60 a night, which does not go far staying with a family in Sydney.

THE CHAIR: No; I imagine it would not. Have you seen any impact from just not having a local doctor to see?

Ms Lamb: Absolutely—like the challenges due to a lack of continuity of care. People do find issues when their specialist who knows and understands their complex condition is in, for example, Sydney and something urgent happens and they have to present to Canberra Hospital emergency, where the doctors there do not necessarily know or understand their treatment regimen or what needs to happen. Communication between hospitals is notoriously inconsistent, and that can create real problems in terms of health outcomes for the people experiencing that but also for their courses of treatment.

THE CHAIR: It sounds to me like an interstate doctor is really not the best option; it is backup.

Ms Lamb: I guess the challenge is that sometimes we do need to access doctors who have a very specific expertise, and economies of scale mean that we are never going to have that expertise here. So I think we do need to be realistic about that and recognise

that what we actually need to do for certain specialties and certain conditions is provide a better support system, a better communication system between health services and better support for people travelling. IPTAAS is not doing it. What can we do to actually help people access it, rather than put up all these barriers? IPTAAS seems to respond as though people are always out there to embezzle rather than actually seeking much-needed support.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR RATTENBURY: Your budget submission discusses the need to provide adequate support for the optimisation of the Digital Health Record. You outline a number of issues, including facilitating online scheduling and regular communications with patients waiting for care, reviewing appropriateness of triage categories and monitoring patients on the waiting list for deterioration and say that, additionally, there are improvements that can be made for people with disabilities in CALD communities because it is only in English. So you have outlined a whole raft of potential improvements. Have you been successful in engaging with the government or the directorate in providing feedback around these issues and making progress on those improvements?

Ms Lamb: We are part of what ACT Health calls the Digital Health Record Consumer Experience Advisory Board and we provide our feedback via that committee. We have not necessarily been successful in achieving change. I think there have been a lot of a lot of unexpected issues perhaps in the establishment of the Digital Health Record and figuring out how to get the data out that we are putting in et cetera. That has taken up a lot of time and probably money, and that has perhaps distracted from optimising the system as it exists. It certainly has a capacity to do a lot more than it is currently. Addressing those accessibility issues, being able to use screen readers for all of the information and being able to have translations of pertinent information are all really important things.

MR RATTENBURY: You have touched on it a bit, but what is the barrier to getting these changes done? Has it just been that the rollout has perhaps not gone quite as planned and so there is not the capacity to do some of these things? Is that your take?

Ms Lamb: We have not been privy to any evaluation of the DHR and so we do not necessarily know what the impediments have been. But we certainly know that, when it comes to what we talked about when we first started talking with ACT Health about what the Digital Health Record would look, it has not achieved all of those things that we talked about in the early days, and it would be great to figure out why and how we can actually achieve that.

MR RATTENBURY: You talk about evaluations. I should probably know the answer to this, but have there been any and you just have not seen them or have there not been any? What is your understanding?

Ms Lamb: I believe there has been one. We have not seen one. We have asked but we have not been privy to it.

MR RATTENBURY: Okay; thank you.

MS CARRICK: My understanding about the DHR is that non-government GPs are getting a loop so that they can get their information in there. I think pharmacies wanted to have a greater scope of services that they provide to the community, but I do not think they put their data into DHR. So there are some real gaps in service provision that are not going into the system at all.

Ms Lamb: Yes; it is unfortunate that any non-public health services are not able to access the DHR records. They have gone some way to working towards getting some access for GPs in particular through DHR Link. I believe that they are expanding the enrolment of GPs into that. How useful GPs are finding that is a question I do not know the answer to. I certainly have not seen or heard of a lot of people using it in that way. It certainly makes it a much more functional thing for consumers if all of their doctors are seeing the information available there.

MS CARRICK: And what the pharmacies are doing too.

Ms Lamb: And to be available for when they have to travel interstate, for example.

MS CARRICK: Yes, because there is the national system and then there is the ACT system. My understanding is that the pharmacies are using the national system and not the ACT system.

Ms Lamb: Yes. The pharmacies have no access to the ACT Digital Health Record. They do have My Health Record with the active script list et cetera.

MS CARRICK: Yes, but I do not think they talk to each other.

Ms Lamb: No, they do not.

MS CARRICK: Last year when I was preparing for the election and I was looking at health stuff, I noticed that we had a very high level of fragmentation in our health system. Do you think that has improved? DHR is a thing to bring it all together. But what are your views on the fragmentation and trying to coordinate things between groups better?

Ms Lamb: It is very difficult. I think you are right that it was thought that DHR would to go some way to bridging those gaps for people. You will see that some of the new navigation services that have been put in place, like the Paediatric Liaison and Navigation Service and the Liaison and Navigation Service for adults who are high users of the health system, have had really good impacts for people. Those services are kind of bridging those gaps where the system is not integrated and where people can fall through the gaps and not know where to turn next and what the next step is. It is not an easy thing to navigate your way through primary care, acute care, specialists, private specialists and public specialists.

The fragmentation is kind of endless for people dealing with complex conditions. So you can see the need when you see how successful and how positively consumers are viewing those navigation services. How possible is it to expand those to more groups who have particular needs in terms of access for health services? A possibility is to

return to a drive for integrated care, which Canberra Health Services talked about a couple of years ago quite a lot. I do not know that anything necessarily came to fruition from that work plan, but it would be good to see a reconsideration of integration, because that really helps consumers to stop falling through the gaps.

MS CARRICK: When I talk to older people in the community, they talk about the community centres or community family health centres that we used to have that were disbanded and we do not have anymore. They talk about how good they were, because they would, I guess, have a bit of allied health in them. Anyway, maybe we need more of them.

Ms Lamb: Yes, and I think people really value those kinds of almost one-stop shops where they can go in and present with their problem and find the right person to help them there and they do not have to get sent from here to there to there. For older and vulnerable people that can be a huge assistance.

MS CARRICK: Thank you.

MS TOUGH: You talk in your submission about making sure we have got a well-funded community sector. I was wondering if you had any views on how the timing of the budget affects the funding of the community sector and how it operates.

Ms Lamb: It is a challenge. I do not have to deal with the budgets necessarily at HCCA, but I do know that for us and for a lot of other organisations it is difficult to plan for the next year when you do not know what your funding looks like one month out. You could probably be getting more certainty in terms of service provision if you are providing people with more notice about what their next year is going to look like in terms of funding and what programs are going to be prioritised. It helps people get a run on that rather than finding out at the last minute and having to get things off the ground very quickly once that funding arrives.

MS TOUGH: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Now for something completely different: in your submission, you have talked about the completion of the room service pilot. The reason I find that interesting is that one of the most frequent complaints I get when I am out talking to people in the community who have recently been in hospital is about food. This is clearly a specific issue, but services like food seem to have a big impact on a consumer's perception of quality of care. Is that a fair call?

Ms Lamb: Yes, absolutely. That is a really important thing for consumers. It is also really important for health outcomes. Good nutrition and the intake of foods that people like and that are culturally appropriate are going to encourage eating that is suitable for the patient in their current condition. It is a big challenge. In good news, I can tell you that the food service pilot is actually continuing now. It took a hiatus, but hopefully it shows some really positive outcomes. Once it is evaluated, maybe we can get that going for everybody in hospital.

THE CHAIR: Yes, thank you.

MR RATTENBURY: Are you are doing any work on air quality, and specifically the impact of wood smoke fire on the health of Canberrans? Is that something that the HCCA has looked at at all?

Ms Lamb: We have not looked at it specifically, but certainly environmental issues in terms of the impact on health but also health's impact on the environment are very close to HCCA's heart, and we certainly would be really keen for the ACT government to do something more conservative and more specific around health and sustainability. Certainly the impact of wood smoke and other things on the health of ACT residents is very relevant, but I also think the impact of our health services on our environment deserves being looked at as well. Health has a huge footprint. Efforts to reduce low-value care and other such things will actually have an impact on our environment as well, and I think it would be good to actively consider that in decision-making about health service provision as well.

MR RATTENBURY: Thanks. You made reference to low-value care. I think it would be fair to say in politics that is a controversial phrase. I think people perhaps sometimes see it as the health department trying to avoid responsibility. Given you have brought it up, can you just talk to us about what you think that is, what it looks like and the opportunities in trying to tackle or reduce some of that low-value health care?

Ms Lamb: It is controversial and people are committed to their way of doing things and what they expect from their treatment, and it can be hard to talk to people about stepping away from healthcare procedures and treatments that we have become accustomed to, that we expect. But there are plenty of things that hospitals and health services are doing which are not best serving their consumers, that are not patient-centred and which do not have optimum outcomes.

There are all sorts of examples—for example, having knee surgery when you could be having rehabilitation. There are a lot of opportunities to provide that without saying, “No, you cannot have the surgery” but saying, “While you are on the waiting list, we proactively send you to a physiotherapist”, and work with them on this. There is a surprising proportion of people who, once they have done that physiotherapy, actually do not need the surgery anymore. That is reducing low-value care, getting better outcomes for the consumer and saving money for the health system—no surgery. There are lots of examples like that. It is not about taking things away from people; it is about choosing the things that are going to have the best health outcomes for the patient.

MR RATTENBURY: Obviously at a time in which the health budget is significantly under pressure, does this approach represent economic savings or is it just a different way of spending money?

Ms Lamb: I do not know that it represents economic savings necessarily, but I can see that it could very well do a good job of reducing the exponential growth that we are currently experiencing. If the people on our huge waiting list of 32,000 outpatients appointments people are waiting for at the Canberra Hospital alone—I am not sure what North Canberra Hospital numbers are—were being provided physiotherapy or other allied health services while they are on that waiting list, a lot of them might not be on the waiting list that much longer. I think there is potential there, but it would probably be a case-by-case basis of having a look at what the possibilities are and what the

specifics are or providing those high-volume services, for example, in a cheaper way. I do not know.

MR RATTENBURY: Thank you.

MS CARRICK: I want to ask about the growing need for psychosocial services. Does your association look at that sort of need in the community?

Ms Lamb: Yes; we look at it from the perspective of the social determinants of health. It absolutely plays a part in the demand for health services and what health services are going to be best suited to people seeking support and seeking care. We absolutely think that there is a role to play for psychosocial services. We do not necessarily act on those ourselves. We probably rely on the expertise of our sibling organisations around the ACT.

MS CARRICK: I understand it is a growing area and I wonder if the services are keeping up with the growing need.

Ms Lamb: I suspect that they are not. I do not know enough to be able to tell you how they are keeping up, but I think it is a common refrain across the sector that there is too much demand and not enough money. Even helping people navigate to those psychosocial services that exist is a challenge. People do not necessarily know where to look to access a support group or a community service, a community centre or allied health care. It is a complex issue.

THE CHAIR: We might wrap things up there. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. 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*. Thank you again.

Short suspension.

KRISHNAMURTHY, MR RAVI, President and Chief Executive Officer, Australian Multicultural Action Network
RAVI, MRS RADHA, Chair, Australian Multicultural Action Network

THE CHAIR: We welcome witnesses from the Australian Multicultural Action Network. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. Ms Barry, I will hand over to you.

MS BARRY: Thank you for attending today. My question is around space for multicultural gatherings, particularly larger gatherings. I have heard from the multicultural community about the lack of an appropriate space to host most of these gatherings. I want to hear from you about what the issues are and whether there has been anything in the budget to address those issues.

Mr Krishnamurthy: This issue was raised over several years with different ACT governments and political parties. The Fitzroy Pavilion was renovated last year. Apparently, it can hold a large number of Multicultural Festival related people there. It can host up to 1,000; that is what we have heard. However, with some of the private functions which I have attended there, for seated dinners and things like that, it is not taking more than about 500 to 550, so the space is still not sufficient. At every election, we approach the different political leaders and make a request for a larger space or a big hall. It has yet to be built, as far as we can see.

With a lot of our community members, what is happening now is that they go to Goolabri, which is outside the ACT. I cannot remember the name of the area. That is where we go. We run a lot of our events there that are slightly bigger than those at Exhibition Park. It can accommodate more people there.

MR RATTENBURY: What was that venue?

Mr Krishnamurthy: Goolabri.

MR RATTENBURY: Is it a winery or something?

Mr Krishnamurthy: It is on the Federal Highway, on the other side. It is outside the ACT. I cannot remember the exact name.

MR RATTENBURY: I know the one you mean.

MS BARRY: One issue that we have heard about with EPIC, for example, is the cost of hire.

Mrs Ravi: Exactly.

MS BARRY: Could you touch on that and whether there are incentives out there to—

Mr Krishnamurthy: I forgot to mention that. When people host private events, if they can spend money from their pocket, they do that. When it comes to community events, including ours, from the Multicultural Action Network, when we want to do our annual event and things like, where we have a large volume of different multicultural members that want to attend, we try to restrict the access. We tell them that it is on a first come, first served basis, because the space gets filled quickly.

The grant that we get as part of the inclusion process—all sorts of different grants—is the money that we use to pay for everything, including running the event and hiring the hall. Apparently, the EPIC hall is quite expensive. A lot of times, I have even written a business case to them. I have requested whether there is a way that we can get some form of discount; any help that we can get would be beneficial. So far, we have never received any discount to run any event there. That is another restriction.

However, when it comes to private events, yes, we can manage. That is totally different, because you can restrict; you draw the circle, then you can slowly expand it. We can manage that sort of thing. But when it comes to community events, the way we run it is pretty harsh. There are genuine reasons. People do not read emails regularly; then they come back after a few days and read it. They say, “You’re running an event? I want to be part of it.” We have to say, “Unfortunately, it has filled up, so we can’t take any more.”

MS BARRY: What effect is that having on the community?

Mrs Ravi: I might add that there are big events like religious events. It may not be a private event; it may be a much bigger event, and we just cannot accommodate that kind of function in one place. You then have to do it over multiple days, in multiple places—multiple venues. There is not a single place where we can do that. Those tend to be low-cost events, so the organisers are just trying to find a place that they can use as a venue. Canberra being Canberra, we cannot always hold these things outside. Sometimes we want a covered area. It is not possible for us to hold it in a big park or something like that. That is a restriction. Based on numbers—for example, Diwali or Ramadan—with any of those ones, we cannot fit into one venue.

MR BRADDOCK: A key part of Fitzroy Pavilion was the ability for community groups to make their own food and utilise the kitchen there. However, I have received some feedback that some community groups have been unable to do that, or they have the need to cook outside. I have seen that several times. Do you have any feedback as to whether that is working as you had hoped and envisaged?

Mr Krishnamurthy: Yes, for sure. I missed that point before. With a lot of the events that we run and that go for anything more than three hours, we try to cater the event. We try to provide at least minimal food, because we deal with seniors and different types of multicultural communities. That is also another way of attracting more people to come and participate, and contribute, so that they learn what else can be done.

Yes, the kitchen in Fitzroy Pavilion is far too small. It is very small. Even when we bring food from outside, and we want to be able to heat it up and serve it to the community, that is still a bit of a struggle there. At some of the private events where

they can spend more money, they bring their own burners that they put outside; then they hire some cool rooms and they cook food. It happens outside the kitchen, not inside the venue. I cannot talk about hygiene and those different issues, but the kitchen space is a bit limited there; there is no doubt about that.

MR RATTENBURY: Do you have any sense of what it actually costs to hire the Fitzroy Pavilion?

Mr Krishnamurthy: One of the quotes I received last year, if I remember correctly, was \$12,000.

MR RATTENBURY: For an evening or a day?

Mr Krishnamurthy: We planned for three separate slots of six hours each, and that is the quote we received.

MR RATTENBURY: That is for a community organisation?

Mr Krishnamurthy: That is for a community organisation. As I mentioned before, we run these activities in the community based on the grant and funding that we receive from the government. If we have to give away a large portion of that grant just for hiring the hall, that causes trouble for us in continuing to run the event. We do source in-kind contributions, and sometimes we draw from our savings. But this stretches our budget. There are not many events that we can run there, with that sort of expense. It is quite expensive.

MR RATTENBURY: Am I correct in understanding that, in addition to that hire fee, you then have to pay other costs, if you want to hire a stage or chairs? Even the electricity is billed separately, I believe?

Mr Krishnamurthy: Yes, that is right. The stage hire is separate, and any of the LED displays that we try to put up there. Again, we need to pay for that. We try to budget for our events and we try to find out how much we can spend. Most of the time we go over our budget. That hall is pretty difficult for us to access at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Is the Fitzroy Pavilion fit for purpose for those large multicultural events for which we always thought we were going to get a facility? Is it fully fit for purpose for everything you need?

Mrs Ravi: I would not say that. For example, for community days that the community has organised, they sometimes want to bring cultural troupes. Fitzroy Pavilion does not have a stage which would accommodate a full cultural performance, for example, and we would have the stage hire as a separate cost. In a big venue it would be nice to have it already there, so that you do not have that cost on top of whatever you are organising. One of the reasons that communities need a bigger place is to be able to bring those artists from overseas or interstate and have some cultural performances, and we cannot do that at the moment in Fitzroy Pavilion.

MR RATTENBURY: What does it cost to hire a stage?

Mr Krishnamurthy: Close to \$3,000 to \$4,000; that is what we have to spend on that. That includes the display. There are some distributors in Sydney; we look at them. There is another multicultural association that you may be familiar with, the Federation of Indian Associations of ACT, FINACT. They are on the AusIndia Fair again this year. I am closely associated with FINACT as well. Every time that you talk about the expenses, it is just going beyond what we can spend.

Given that the AusIndia Fair is happening in winter, we do not want to run such a large, full-day event outside. As I mentioned, we have a lot of seniors, and there are some disabled members. We do not want to expose them to the cold, so we need a closed venue, a heated facility, so that we can give them a nice outing, a feeling of coming into the community and spending time together.

MR RATTENBURY: Based on this evidence, we are looking at probably a minimum of \$15,000 to \$20,000 to put on a community day, using the Fitzroy Pavilion?

Mrs Ravi: Yes.

Mr Krishnamurthy: For sure, yes.

THE CHAIR: It sounds like that is a starting point.

MR RATTENBURY: That is without entertainment, food or anything.

Mrs Ravi: You have insurance on top of this. You have to make sure that, with the stage hire, people do not trip over. There are all those costs.

Mr Krishnamurthy: With the different cultural groups, some are already passionate about performing in front of a crowd, so they are happy to do it on a volunteering basis, but most of them do require some contribution. All those costs are on top of what we spend for the venue and setting up the stage.

MR RATTENBURY: I want to ask about mental health treatments or access to services for the multicultural community. Do you think there are sufficient services available for the size of the community? Was there anything in the budget that you think helped to address this?

Mr Krishnamurthy: I prepared an opening statement that I was about to give at the beginning. In that, we note that there are front lines, intersectionality, where we deal with aged care, mental health, youth disability and community cohesion. The budget this time had mixed implications for all our communities. That is how I want to put it. I am also part of Carers ACT, the mental health community voice network, where we continually discuss the issues that different multicultural members go through.

One is the language barrier, which is still a struggle. This network is available for them to access. We are hearing that there is a lot of demand for TIS, which is the Translating and Interpreting Service. However, because of different limitations they have with the NAATI accreditation for the language, when people apply to become an interpreter, there are barriers that they must overcome. NAATI is a totally complicated process to go through. These are the difficult situations that we go through.

We do not really need a TIS service for some of the non-sensitive dealings with the public service. For example, if it is about mental health, my own father is an elderly person at home, and if I am taking him to some other service providers, I am there next to him. Sometimes we do offer the TIS service, and in that type of situation you do not really need a fully NAATI-qualified language-proficient person trying to communicate. So that language restriction could be minimised.

I am originally from a Tamil background, so I have studied Tamil. I have learned it for many years over in India, and I have migrated here. I am also part of the ACT Community Language Schools Association. I am a board member there. We are always open, and we say we are happy to provide our service, but we are not really TIS—we are not NAATI-qualified people. If that sort of language restriction could be limited, and if people could use the service that we provide for mental health and other health-related networks, I think we would be happy to support that very well.

When it comes to a service provider accessing NDIS, I think it is still being reviewed. I do have my own hearing problem. I am part of Deafness Forum Australia. I am a citizen and group member. We discuss what is happening in NDIS. That is a totally different beast. At the moment the whole list is being reviewed, and there are difficulties that we go through there as well.

A lot of people talk about mental health issues. With hearing and vision impairment, and how they can have different providers, this whole giant case is becoming too complex. That is what I am trying to say. For CALD and multicultural members, language itself is a bit difficult. That is one of the reasons why there is a translation of the English version of all documents, which is very helpful, and we thank all officials for doing that. That is very helpful to us. But CALD members' issues need to be spoken about by us. That is what I wanted to say. I want to speak about issues. I do not want someone else making that decision for me. There are difficulties there, yes.

MS CARRICK: I want to go back to community facilities—not the big ones but the small ones out in the community. If you have a community in Tuggeranong, or wherever they are, what sort of access do you have to community facilities at the smaller, local level? In the old days, in the 60s and 70s, there were clubs for the cultural groups as they came to Canberra, but I do not think they do that anymore. How do you get access to community space? Have you ever approached one of those community areas that might be on its way out and see whether you can take over their concessional lease?

Mrs Ravi: Usually, the communities would approach the local scout halls or one of those community centres. In the newer suburbs, they have community centres. But they are not free, I do not think. Gungahlin Library has a couple of rooms that you can hire. Those are probably the smaller rooms. Sometimes our community members have little workshops or something, and they can use one of those rooms. But they are mostly booked all the time, so it is hard to find something at short notice. Unless you have planned your community event much in advance, they are really difficult to find.

We find that the communities may be living in Gungahlin, but they will have a function far away from there, because they cannot find a local room which is big enough to

accommodate all their community members. They will come to the city. If it is expensive in the city, they will go to Belconnen, or wherever they find a place that they can use. It is all charged for, mostly. I do not think we have a list of those community centres that are on their way out. I would love to have one of those!

MS BARRY: Talking about community spaces, I know that the Multicultural Hub is often seen as the centre for community functions. But I have heard that that centre is badly run-down. I want to get your views on that, and whether there is anything in the budget to address the work that is needed to fix the building.

Mr Krishnamurthy: The Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre is very popular among us. For several decades, we ran many events there. With the capacity of the hall, I think it is—

Mrs Ravi: Hundred.

Mr Krishnamurthy: We try to squeeze in up to 180, if it is a standing event. However, if we count the number of seats there, it is currently 120 to 150, and that is it. That is the maximum. There are some small events we have run over there—seated dinners and things like that. It cannot take more than about 100 people. It was renovated a few years ago, so the hall looks much better than how it used to look. With the kitchen facilities, we used to use them, but now we are not able to use the kitchen.

MS BARRY: Why is that?

Mr Krishnamurthy: There was a gas leak issue a year or 1½ years ago. After that, we started requesting kitchen hiring. We do not do any more cooking over there; we always bring our catered food from outside and we serve it to the community.

MR RATTENBURY: You are saying it broke and did not get repaired?

Mr Krishnamurthy: For a while, for two to three continuous events, we tried to approach the Office for Multicultural Affairs. We approached them and said, “Can we use the kitchen to cook the food?” They said, “There was a gas leak, so it’s closed, and you can’t use the kitchen facilities.” That was, I think, a year ago. I cannot remember exactly. After that, we stopped requesting access to the kitchen. I think you need to pay separately for that as well. We pay, for use of the kitchen facilities, on top of what we pay for the hall.

These are all community-funded events. Through the grant, we spend money to run these events, so we cannot spend more and more on all of that. We try to bargain with one of the caterers and see whether they can absorb the cost. We negotiate much better with them. That is how I am running the program. But the hall is getting smaller as the community is expanding. With smaller events, yes, we can do that in Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre. There is a function hall there. Other than that, it is pretty hard.

I am also part of Canberra Sanskrit School, the school we run for the small kids. We do it in the Harmonie room. There is also a room at one of the schools. That takes about 15 to 20 students; that is the maximum capacity. The multicultural centre, which was built maybe two or three decades ago, was serving the purpose at that time. Now it is

too small.

MS TOUGH: I am interested in what AMAN's current priorities are. I know that, over the decade or so that your organisation has existed, you have grown a lot and have expanded across the community. What are your current priorities, and how is government supporting these priorities? What more could we do to provide support?

Mr Krishnamurthy: Health is one of the key priorities. The CALD network is expanding in all directions. The Nepali community has grown a lot in Canberra. The same is the case with the Chinese, Indian and African populations. The health network needs to be expanded and there needs to be more access, mainly in the bulk-billing area. As we know, bulk-billing was an issue before, and in between it was much better. In the last two years, the number of bulk-billing GPs has gone down a lot. I have been going to my GP for almost 12 or 13 years. They add out-of-pocket expenses and say, "With the support that we get from Medicare and all that, we can't fund it; you will have to pay." As I said, my elderly father is living with me. Luckily, he is being covered, which is fantastic.

The other thing I have found is that even for people with a low income care card, and who are in the lower income category, they are still waiting for too long, mainly for dental services and eye-related consultations. It is way too long. One member who is a part of our network, the Multicultural Action Network, is having all sorts of issues. He is 82 or 83 years old. In April or May, he went for a check-up in Canberra Health Services, the city health centre. He was struggling to eat food, and he still has not received a call from the health department about what needs to happen. I was there with him when he went for his check-up and they said, "Everything, all the broken teeth, need to be removed and they need to put in dentures." There was a step-by-step process. He has not heard anything for about 2½ months. I know how difficult it is for him to have even a single meal at home. It is a struggle.

Mrs Ravi: Another area of interest for us would be seniors' health and how we can help the seniors in the multicultural communities to get access to various things. Often they do not know what is available. Reaching out to them and providing them with that information is an area that we want to focus on.

The other one would be to help women who are looking after kids—maybe young kids. We are trying to help them to connect with services to see what is available to them. A number of them have home-based businesses, so we try and connect them to each other. Often that becomes a real community of support for each other. That is another thing that is in the pipeline for us.

Mr Krishnamurthy: Another area is infrastructure. We live in one of the inner Canberra suburbs, and footpaths are an issue. Last year a couple of elderly people living in our street had an accident because the footpath went up and down; trees were lifting the pavement. Through Fix My Street, we did send some of those incidents to the government. There were some markings done on the footpath. The markings are fading after a year now, but they have not been fixed at all. It is a struggle. At the end of the street there were guys that were trying to re-pave the whole path. I had a chat with them. I asked them, "Are you guys going to fix everything there?" They had some colour coding in their list and they said, "Whatever is marked in pink, we fix only that." Where

these people fell down, it was marked in white and in other colours, and they said, “No, we won’t be looking after all those.” It has been more than a year. It was in March last year, I believe, that these things happened, and it is now July. The markings are going; that is all. Nothing has happened.

MR BRADDOCK: I want some feedback on the multicultural participation grants, and whether you have any views on whether they are fit for purpose, in terms of both the number and size of those grants.

Mr Krishnamurthy: With the participation grants that we received in our network, I cannot remember the figure. Twenty per cent is what we decided to contribute from our packet to run our events. I am sorry; I was not prepared for that question.

Most of the time I notice that we do not receive the full grant when we ask for it. We have a lot of fundraising events, and we can make a contribution from our own packet, so we are able to run those events. We did receive something, but I cannot remember exactly how much we got. I am quite sure that we did not fully receive what we asked for. Maybe it was because of budget constraints. I am not sure exactly why it happened.

However, the Multicultural Festival last year went really well. I spoke with many community members, and everybody was happy, even in AMAN. In the Multicultural Action Network, we were quite comfortable with the grant that we received because we were able to bring cultural groups from interstate, and the performance went really well. You are all welcome to the next one, *Echoes from the Delta*.

MS BARRY: What have you heard about the future of the Advisory Council for Multiculturalism?

Mr Krishnamurthy: We have not heard about any new recruitment happening for the Ministerial Advisory Council for Multiculturalism. However, there is a workshop being planned for 2 August, for which I have registered. We are keen to be part of it.

I do know that MACM met with different providers sometime last month, and they got some input. I heard from a senior director. With respect to new recruitment in MACM, I have not heard anything. I have not seen that. Most of our members look at the diversity, what sort of contribution they can make, any roles coming up, and they can apply. So far, I have not heard about any new openings.

MS BARRY: Do you think it is an effective group, if the community peak bodies are not hearing anything?

Mrs Ravi: We have not really seen a lot coming out of that, separate from what we have been used to. For AMAN specifically, we have not seen anything major coming out of that particular group.

Mr Krishnamurthy: In September last year, there was one workshop that was done. Most of the members at the workshop raised the same concern. I think that was a year after the MACM was formed. There was a workshop and we discussed a lot of points there. We did tell them we needed to know what was happening after the workshop and how it was being taken forward, and how we could continuously contribute. But we did

not hear anything.

MS BARRY: Nothing then?

Mr Krishnamurthy: We never heard anything.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank our witnesses who have assisted the committee through their experience and knowledge. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard for their support. If a member wishes to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliamentary portal as soon as possible, and no later than five business days from today. This meeting is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 5.04 pm