



**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**

**PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**TUESDAY, 29 JULY 2025**

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**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.

## **APPEARANCES**

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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 9.03 am.**

Appearances:

Paterson, Dr Marisa, Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Women, Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, Minister for Corrections and Minister for Gaming Reform

Orr, Ms Suzanne, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services and Minister for Seniors and Veterans

Health and Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Windeyer, Ms Kirsty, Deputy Director General, Housing and Inclusion

Sabellico, Ms Anne-Maree, Acting Deputy Director-General, Children, Families and Strategic Reform

Bogiatzis, Ms Vasiliki, Acting Executive Group Manager, Inclusion

Connor, Ms Tina, Acting Executive Branch Manager, Women, Youth, LGBTIQIA+ and Multicultural Affairs

Akhter, Ms Sanzida, Nominal Executive Group Manager, Community, Youth Engagement and Multicultural Affairs, Office for LGBTIQIA+

Dolan, Ms Fiona, Executive Branch Manager, Commissioning, Policy and Service Design

**THE CHAIR:** Good morning, and welcome to the public hearings 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 today will hear from Dr Marisa Paterson MLA, in her capacity as the Minister for Women, and Ms Suzanne Orr MLA, the Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services, the Minister for Seniors and Veterans, and the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Later today, the committee will also hear from Icon Water, Evoenergy, and Ms Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA, in her capacity as the Minister for the Public Service.

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 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 the 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 webstreamed 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 Dr Marisa Paterson MLA, in her capacity as the Minister for Women. I understand we will be welcoming Ms Suzanne Orr MLA, in her capacity as the Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services, the Minister for Seniors and Veterans, and the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. However, I understand she has been delayed at this stage. We also welcome the officials in attendance. We note that Mr Michael Pettersson MLA, the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and the Minister for Children, Youth and Families, sends his apologies today.

For the officials, 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. The questions I wanted to kick off with are for Ms Orr. We will go to Miss Nuttall.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I would like to talk about funding for women's services. I understand that the funding for the Multicultural Hub's women's program is not continuing. Can you confirm whether that is the case?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** I acknowledge that I have read the privilege statement. Miss Nuttall, are you referring to the program that delivers domestic and sexual violence services?

**MISS NUTTALL:** Yes.

**Dr Paterson:** That is a question from one of yesterday's outputs.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I understand, from looking at the website, that there is a parent program that supports women across a number of areas. Can I confirm whether that parent program is—

**Dr Paterson:** That is from the women's safety output in the hearing yesterday.

**THE CHAIR:** Minister, is it something that you are able to take on notice, if you do not have the relevant officials here?

**Dr Paterson:** Sure. We will answer the question, but the output classes for this session relate to the Office for Women, which was covered by yesterday's hearing.

**THE CHAIR:** I certainly understand. It would be useful, rather than have everyone go back and resubmit on the system, if you are able to—

**MR RATTENBURY:** I accept that there is a DFV component to that work, but Miss Nuttall, in her question, said that she understands they support a range of other services for women of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The question is: is there money that is normally committed from the Office for Women beyond domestic and family violence?

**Dr Paterson:** No.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Okay. I think it is fine to leave it with what was said yesterday.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In terms of other programs that support women's services, or provide women's services, within the Office for Women, do you keep track of those services and whether or not their funding is continuing each year?

**Dr Paterson:** There is only one service that the Office for Women funds or has a funding contract with, and that is Fearless Women. That is quite an unusual funding arrangement for the Office for Women. They do not necessarily do service delivery. The 2025-26 budget provided \$772,000 to deliver Fearless Women's Empowerment Program. That funding is over two years.

The Office for Women administers grants. We have return to work grants, the Women's Participation grants and the Audrey Fagan grants. We also have the period products legislation that we are responsible for delivering.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Is this the right session to ask about gender-sensitive urban design?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I am interested in understanding whether the Office for Women conducted consultation on the Gender Sensitive Urban Design Framework.

**Ms Rule:** The Office for Women has a role in pulling together the Women's Plan and strategy, and some of the materials like the Women's Budget Statement. But the delivery of individual initiatives is the responsibility of the directorates to which those pieces of work are assigned. The consultation, typically, would be conducted by the directorate responsible for delivering that measure, which in this instance would be—

**Dr Paterson:** TCCS.

**Ms Rule:** Yes, the old TCCS, whatever the new directorate is called—CED. Questions about that consultation and how that process is rolling out are questions for that directorate.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Was there a view, from the Office for Women's perspective, about how that would fit in more broadly with support for women across the ACT? What do you see as its role?

**Dr Paterson:** That is really the work of the Women's Plan. The Women's Plan has a whole range of thematic breakdowns—health and wellbeing, community safety, leadership and workforce participation, housing and homelessness, and appropriate and accessible services. There are multiple actions in the third action plan that relate to those particular themes which directorates will deliver. Gender-sensitive urban design is a key part of the broader picture for reform, to see gender equality at the forefront of what government does.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In terms of the Women's Plan more broadly, I understand that it is

due for expiry fairly soon. What does the process of pulling together the new ACT Women's Plan look like? As part of that, is it the Office for Women that consults with the sector on the Women's Plan?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. This is a really exciting piece of work that is coming up. We will be seeking broad community input and government input. The exact process has not been detailed yet. The work will start next year. The year after, we will be looking to implement the next plan. We will be seeking broad ideas around what we can do from the sector and from the community, about how we can transform Canberra for the next 10 years, to see that we have an equal, accessible, safe community.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That sounds excellent. One of the things that makes a good plan, obviously, is the funding component that is attached. When you say work will start next year, is that the next financial year?

**Dr Paterson:** It will start at the beginning of this year.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Yes. Miss Nuttall, the current Women's Plan is from 2016 to 2026, and we are not yet in 2026. Over the course of 2026, we will be developing the new plan, for it to be launched in 2027, and implemented from that point onwards.

**Dr Paterson:** There will also be an evaluation of the current plan, to see how that went.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That probably brings us to the start of the line of questioning, when it comes to the Women's Plan. Certainly, we have been hearing from the sector that it is important to understand what women's services actually offer here in the ACT. As part of that plan, or just in general, is it the intent of the Office for Women to do any sector mapping exercises, in order to understand what services are provided and where the gaps in need might be?

**Dr Paterson:** Potentially. Officials might have different views, but I feel that the Women's Plan is really about looking at government's responsibility and actions that government can take to deliver on commitments to improve gender equality. This is a whole-of-community issue, and I would like to see us address this broadly. I think there is definitely scope for these discussions.

**Ms Rule:** As part of developing the plan, although we have not quite got the plan in place for the plan, if you like, we would typically consult broadly on these things and seek submissions. We would publish a listening report. Part of that listening report is to allow the sector, the community more broadly and other parts of government, to tell us what they think the priorities should be and where the gaps might lie. We can use that information to inform what advice we provide to government and what goes into the plan itself. I would expect that, if we do the consultation well, those organisations who are talking to you will also talk to us, and tell us where those gaps and issues may lie.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Is there any opportunity, as part of that, to co-design the upcoming Women's Plan in partnership with the sector? Consultation is good, but sometimes, if there is consultation up to a point and then it disappears into a black box, it can be difficult to get buy-in.

**Ms Rule:** As I said, we have not mapped out the process that we will go through, but I would anticipate that we will work closely with parts of the sector to design that plan.

**MR EMERSON:** I want to go back to the gender-sensitive urban design question, which was part of Miss Nuttall's questioning. Looking at the perception of safety, and our targets in terms of women's feeling of safety when alone at night, it looks like it is 42 per cent across this year and out through the forwards. I have been looking at the data that I think is at the root of that, and trying to understand exactly how that target was put together, because you have data points around how many women actually walked alone at night, and how many of those women felt safe.

**Dr Paterson:** The information that informs those targets comes from the National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing. It is a national survey with publicly published data that is only published with respect to people, so there are men and women in their data. They provide us with data from female respondents and male respondents, so that we can understand where women sit, in terms of their experiences of feeling safe or not.

In the last year, the data showed that when women were asked, "How safe do you feel when you are by yourself walking or jogging in your neighbourhood during the night?" 40 per cent of female respondents said they felt safe, which is above the national average of 34 per cent. When asked how safe they felt when they are travelling by themselves on public transport during the night, 23 per cent of female respondents in the ACT felt safe, which was above the national average of 21 per cent. Further, when asked, "How safe do you feel at home by yourself during the night?" 84 per cent of women said they felt safe, which was above the national average of 75 per cent.

Those targets that are in the indicators are set above where these data points are. We are striving to improve women's perceptions of safety in the ACT. You will see that we will be looking for an increase of two per cent over the next year, in terms of how safe women feel in their neighbourhood during the night, and a more substantial increase in terms of an estimate during the day.

**MR EMERSON:** Is that 2023-24 data?

**Dr Paterson:** No, this is 2024-25 data, which they have—

**MR EMERSON:** It is not publicly available; they just provide that to you? I am looking at some old—

**Dr Paterson:** They have said that that data is not comparable to other years because they have changed the methodology. They have now gone from telephone surveys to an online probability-based panel. We will start to see shifts in that data, but it will be more reliable data because you will not have to have a telephone.

**MR EMERSON:** I was looking at some of the old data, and we have the highest perceptions of safety in the country, which I think is really positive. I have a general policy question. How does that integrate with what the Office for Women is doing in terms of other parts of government? I am thinking specifically about lighting, which those guidelines indicate.



**Dr Paterson:** Further to the conversation we had in yesterday's hearing with Ms Carrick, potentially, there is some work we can do around strategic indicators. That is one indicator. Ultimately, the work that the Office for Women does in the Women's Plan is about needing to see cultural change and structural change, and that is what the plan attempts to go to.

With women's safety, unfortunately, these figures will remain where they are. It is devastating to think that women do not feel safe going out at night. Unfortunately, that is the fact. Until men's behaviour changes, we will see those figures stay the same. I was talking to my 14-year-old daughter and her friends the other night, and they were talking about how unsafe they felt around one of our bus interchanges, and how men were doing creepy things that made them feel unsafe on regular occasions. Until that behaviour changes, until we have people calling out that behaviour, until we have the structures in place where we have affordable child care, gender equity in pay, workplaces that are safe and paid parental leave, until we get those real, structural, cultural shifts and make it not okay for views like Andrew Tate's to proliferate through our society, we will continue to have a problem.

**MR EMERSON:** It could be one of those indicators. I was looking at the source data, and 55 per cent of women—this was in 2021-22—did not walk alone at all, through the year. In the subset of women who walked alone, among those who did, who felt safe, it becomes an ever-decreasing slice of the pie, which is pretty alarming.

**Dr Paterson:** There are areas where you would feel safe and others where you would not at all. That is where the gender-sensitive urban design comes into play, in terms of how we look at our city as a whole, and the projects that the government does, in terms of looking broadly at how we can make those areas safer. It also requires our city to develop, in terms of having more people around and being present. There are lots of different settings around our city where people would feel safer than in others.

**MS CARRICK:** Do you have conversations with Transport Canberra? You mentioned that only 23 per cent of women feel safe at night on public transport. That is different from going to or from. When they are on the bus or the light rail, only 23 per cent feel safe at night. That is a controlled environment. What conversations have you had with Transport Canberra about how they might be able to have security people on there, to start deterring that sort of behaviour?

**Dr Paterson:** Those conversations have been had. In the budget this year the government committed to having transit officers on public transport, on our buses, to try and improve the perceptions of safety. That work is currently being undertaken by the minister.

**MS CARRICK:** With the gender urban design, how do you get involved with that? I know the Woden bus interchange; I can imagine that people would not feel too safe there. The new West Plaza has blank walls. There are no active fronts. It is part of the urban design guidelines to have activity, but it was not implemented.

**Dr Paterson:** The bus interchange is currently being developed. The new bus interchange, I would hope, provides a much safer, modern environment for commuters.

That whole area around CIT has recently opened. There will be thousands of students there every day, which is exactly what we need to activate that area. There is a lot of development work occurring in Woden which will, ultimately, improve the public safety and the surveillance around that area. You will get more shopfronts; you will get more businesses investing in establishing around that area, because you have the students there, and you have the people and the traffic going through there.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, and you have blank walls. You have a youth foyer with a blank wall.

**Dr Paterson:** Walls do not keep people safe.

**MS CARRICK:** That is why we should not have blank walls, but that is what has been put in. Anyway, I will let it go.

**Dr Paterson:** This is not really my portfolio area, anyway.

**MS CARRICK:** If we talk about urban design, when we design something, we should look at how we activate it.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. Perhaps that is a question for a different minister. As I said, the gender-sensitive urban design falls within the Women's Plan, which is my responsibility, but the delivery of it is the responsibility of the City and Environment portfolio.

**MS CARRICK:** My question was about how you get involved in ensuring that they design it with these design guides in mind.

**Dr Paterson:** I would put that to the minister, when they appear before you.

**MS BARRY:** Minister, what consideration has been given to community policing, as part of the solutions to improving the perception of women being safe?

**Dr Paterson:** That would be a question for the police portfolio. Policing does not come under this.

**MS BARRY:** Okay, so no consideration has been given, essentially.

**Dr Paterson:** No, that is not what I said. It is not related to this portfolio's work. Ask that question in the police session, either tomorrow or the next day.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Minister, I appreciate your passion for women's safety, and I share your frustration about those figures and the sense that people have while they are out there. I was interested to read, on page 30 of this directorate's budget statement, about the ending of the Women's Safety Grants program. Why have they been dropped, in light of the important points you were just making?

**Dr Paterson:** Those grants have been great, and little bits of money have gone to different things that have happened in the community, but in this budget there was a focus on our frontline services, and that money was redirected to our frontline service

budget. Again, that is part of what was looked at in yesterday's outputs.

**MR RATTENBURY:** I appreciate that we had that discussion yesterday. Part of the reason I was asking the questions that I asked yesterday was to try to understand what was new money. We are now finding out that that increase in funding for frontline services has come instead of things like Women's Safety Grants. It is not new money from the government; this is a redirection.

**Dr Paterson:** These grants are a small amount of money.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Mr Rattenbury, I can talk to that. \$100,000 had previously been allocated to the Women's Safety Grants per annum. That funding was repurposed in the budget and redirected towards frontline services, as the minister said. Although the grants have delivered some useful things over the years, and a lot of prevention-type educational sessions and forums, the grant amount had not increased over the years. The \$100,000 is not worth as much as it was perhaps 10 years ago. Community organisations were receiving grants of small amounts, and a decision was made by government to repurpose those grants.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Minister, you just observed that they were great and that they had done some important things. I take the point that Ms Bogiatzis just made in her evidence that the quantum could have been small; perhaps you could have increased the quantum.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes, or invest in the other programs, which we chose to invest in. Again, this was really a question for yesterday's hearing.

**MR RATTENBURY:** No. It is in this portfolio. I am asking why these grants have been dropped.

**THE CHAIR:** I will also note that it is in response to some comments you have already made, so I will allow it.

**MS BARRY:** What evaluations of the effectiveness of these grants were conducted before the closure of the program?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** This grants program has not been evaluated. With every grant that is provided, the organisation that receives funding provides an acquittal, and an account of what they did and how they delivered it. The directorate collects that information, but an overarching evaluation as to the effectiveness of the grants has not occurred.

**Dr Paterson:** There are still multiple grants under the Office for Women that are administered by the Office for Women. They include the return to work grants, for which there is \$160,000 worth of grants. There is \$80,000 worth of women's participation grants and \$10,000 for the Audrey Fagan Enrichment Grants. These grants have significant participation in them, and they are really successful.

**MS BARRY:** Minister, I was asking about the Women's Safety Grants program, which has closed, and whether an evaluation of its effectiveness was conducted.

**Dr Paterson:** No.

**MS BARRY:** What women's groups were consulted before the program ceased?

**Dr Paterson:** None. The decision was made that that money would be better redirected to frontline services.

**Ms Rule:** But we do the community budget consultation process. The key organisations in this space are very active in putting in budget submissions that outline for us what their priorities are. The clear priority coming through those community budget submissions was to put more funding into frontline services.

**MR RATTENBURY:** I do not imagine they said at the expense of the Women's Safety Grants program, though. That was not in their feedback, was it?

**Ms Rule:** It was not pulled out as one of their priorities.

**MS BARRY:** But if you did not consult and conduct an evaluation, how would you know?

**Ms Rule:** I am just giving some more information on the consultation process that we go through.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Rule, I think the question that we are trying to get to—and I think you have already answered it—is whether there was any specific consultation around winding up the program.

**Dr Paterson:** No. Ultimately, the priority was to fund frontline services and programs. That is what we heard loud and clear from the community sector, and that is the decision that was made.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a couple of clarifications, I think, before we move on to the next line. Talking about gender-sensitive urban design before, just coming on the back of Ms Carrick's comments, I wonder how you provide input to—and does gender-sensitive urban design extend to how major projects are undertaken? This is in the context of that CIT project where the actual process of developing CIT resulted in really dark places that a lot of people reached out to multiple members about with concerns about safety in that area.

**Dr Paterson:** So again, that goes to the portfolio that is responsible for CIT or infrastructure.

**THE CHAIR:** No. So the question is about the principle. Is the work that you are undertaking in relation to gender-sensitive urban design—

**Dr Paterson:** I am not undertaking any work in relation to gender-sensitive. I think it is planning.

**THE CHAIR:** Is there a policy point?

**Dr Paterson:** Pardon?

**Ms Orr:** I think it is planning that you are after, Mr Cocks.

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry?

**Ms Orr:** I think it is the Planning Directorate that you are after.

**MS CARRICK:** Because you are responsible for the policy, and so—

**THE CHAIR:** We started off with a discussion around—

**Dr Paterson:** I am responsible for the Women's Plan, which has a full range of initiatives across government, whole-of-government, so education. Again, I am not responsible for the delivery of the education—

**THE CHAIR:** No, no, that is right, you are not responsible for the delivery, but I would imagine that you have a policy interest in it.

**Dr Paterson:** Very much so.

**THE CHAIR:** And that is why I ask whether your policy work and the work you are doing around—I assume you are doing some work around where you would like to see gender-sensitive urban design go—whether your concept of gender-sensitive urban design actually extends to the development process.

**Dr Paterson:** You have to ask another minister that. My work is around the Women's Plan and seeing that the Women's Plan is implemented. The work will start on the next Women's Plan, of which there will be a whole range of consultation as we discussed, which will look at whether gender-sensitive urban design should be part of the next Women's Plan or in what capacity it should be part of the next iteration of plan and actions. But it is not my responsibility to deliver the gender-sensitive urban design framework across Canberra.

**MS CARRICK:** So you did not even have a conversation saying, "Hey, how is the gender-sensitive urban design going for the new CIT?"

**Dr Paterson:** No, we do. We do, and we evaluate the Women's Plan.

**MS CARRICK:** So, you know, when you have the conversations about the design for the CIT area, like—

**Dr Paterson:** But I am not the minister responsible to answer those questions.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay, I am not sure we are going to get anything extra out of the minister on this one. The other thing I want to ask about, right back to the start of the line of questioning talking about the women's strategy, I understand that there was a—

**Dr Paterson:** Mr Cocks, the Women's Plan or strategy?

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry, the ACT Women's Plan 2016-2026.

**Dr Paterson:** Plan, yes.

**THE CHAIR:** I understand there was a Third Action Plan that extends to this year, 2025.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** We have heard from officials that there is no plan to have a plan until 2027 in terms of the ACT Women's Plan.

**Dr Paterson:** Sorry, Mr Cocks, I will clarify for you. The ACT Women's Plan goes from 2016 to 2026, so next year it finishes. Under the Women's Plan there are action plans. There is a First Action Plan, Second and Third. We are in the current Third Action Plan.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, if I can come to my question which is, I mean, firstly, will there be an action plan that covers the period from the end of 2025, which I understand was the end of the Third Action Plan?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes, the Third Action Plan goes from 2023 to 2026.

**THE CHAIR:** So that expires—

**Dr Paterson:** Next year.

**THE CHAIR:** Is that through to the end of 2026?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** And then what date do you intend for the new ACT Women's Plan? Will there be a gap, in essence, between the expiry of the ACT Women's Plan in 2026 and the introduction of a new one at some point in 2027?

**Dr Paterson:** Well, we would look to implement the next Women's Plan for 2027 onwards, to 2037. As I said, we have not started the work to develop the project plan for that, exactly what it would look like. I would—

**THE CHAIR:** Is there any funding in the budget to start undertaking that work to get it developed ahead of its expiry? Usually, these processes would take some time and I am curious, when is the work going to actually start to get that in place and is there funding?

**Dr Paterson:** It is starting. So the work is starting and it will continue to progress over this year. We will go to more detailed consultation and that next year. Yes, we will have a more detailed plan. So the planning for next year has begun. We are in discussions about it.

**THE CHAIR:** Just to clarify, I am pretty sure I heard earlier that there is currently no plan for how you are developing the plan.

**Ms Rule:** Mr Cocks, I think we have got plenty of time. There is still a year and a half before the new plan is due and so we would anticipate that into the next calendar year we will commence that work and have plenty of time available to get a new plan in place. It is the core business of the Office for Women, so there is not budget funding dedicated to developing the plan because that is actually what is the core business of the people who work in the Office for Women and other people across the Health and Community Services Directorate. So I do not see this as a risk in terms of us not being able to complete the work or that the work is off track. It is entirely where I would expect it to be 18 months out from the expiration of the current plan.

**THE CHAIR:** So it sounds like then the current resourcing will be sufficient to achieve that deadline at the end of next year?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**MS CARRICK:** I wanted to ask about the salaries of the community sector and the timing of knowing when grants will be available to the community organisations. We always hear that, you know, the budget being in the last week—

**Dr Paterson:** It is Ms Orr.

**MS CARRICK:** so there is uncertainty, and that community organisations lose staff because of the uncertainty of the timing of the budget, and also the salaries are not the same as the public service and so they will lose people to the public service or other areas. So how does the government manage that to support the community organisations?

**Ms Orr:** Okay, Ms Carrick, there is a lot in your question and it has all got slightly different answers so bear with me while I work through it.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, but well, to cut to the chase: how does the government manage the disparity in the wages and the security of employment?

**Ms Orr:** As to the wages between the community sector and the public service, obviously the ACT government negotiates with the public service through the enterprise agreements on their wages. For the community sector, their wages are primarily—and correct me if I am wrong, Ms Evans and Ms Dolan, but their wages are primarily set through the SCHADS agreement, which is the workplace agreement that is in place for the community sector. It is not something that the government would necessarily have a role in. It is what conditions the employers negotiate with their employees, and through the Fair Work setting of the award.

Where the government would come in is when we are commissioning and procuring services through the commissioning process, it is through the costings. So whoever is tendering for that particular service or program would provide the estimates and their cost basis to what they think the cost would be. Where it gets a little bit tricky is if it

was a multiyear contract, if something changes, which we saw quite a few years ago when the ERO funding came in. That was quite a big change in the award rate, so therefore that can have a flow-on effect that is not necessarily known at the time you sign the contract. Then there is a bit of a discussion as to how we work through those issues when they come up. I think that is probably it in a nutshell. Ms Evans and Ms Dolan might be able to add something slightly more eloquently than what I have just described, though.

**Ms Dolan:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. As the minister has suggested, for community sector organisations the settings of the payment for them is set by awards. There are a range of awards and settings that are set by the Fair Work Commission that set the payment and conditions for community sector classes of employment. It is the responsibility of employers to ensure they meet the costs of those classes of awards. Employers have the capacity to choose whether or not they wish to pay above award rates, which is uncommon across the industry.

**MS CARRICK:** So the government though acknowledges the difficulties that the community sector faces with the SCHADS award not necessarily being as high-paid as the public servants?

**Ms Rule:** I do not think, Ms Carrick—it is apples and oranges. They are different things. There is a whole industrial relations framework that sets award rates across all industries and all employers, and certainly it is not the responsibility of this directorate in terms of employment policy. In fact, much of that award wages system policy is set at the commonwealth level. So I think our job really in health and community services is to understand what those awards are and therefore how that influences or informs the amount of funding that goes to the community sector and how we can help community sector organisations have certainty about their funding to be able to manage their employment arrangements. But in terms of what those rates are, what the awards and what the industrial arrangements are that community sector employers might have in place, that is really an issue for those organisations and the people that set the awards, which is not us.

**MS CARRICK:** So do you make sure that they get the on-costs or admin costs to support those positions?

**Ms Rule:** So when community sector organisations are working with us through either a grants or procurement process or a commissioning process, they give us a cost of what it would cost them to deliver the services that we have out in the market, and one of the costs items is always the on-costs and administrative overheads. We set certain parameters depending on what the process is that we are going through. We try and benchmark those, and it is often a point of negotiation and discussion, but every organisation is different. So those things are included in the costing and we are always negotiating those matters with community sector organisations.

**MS CARRICK:** We heard community organisations were concerned about the procurement process and that some other organisations might come in under, with lower costs, and perhaps people outside of Canberra are getting the work. How do you ensure that the local knowledge is part of the criteria for the community sector?



**Ms Orr:** Ms Carrick, can I just check, were those comments in relation to the Community Day and the catchment and environment groups that were—

**MS CARRICK:** Yes.

**Ms Orr:** Yes, so I think I might just take that question because I have got a bit over both portfolios, even though that is technically in the environment. I think with the particular issue with the environment groups, I think it is a newer process on that side and the concerns they have raised are very particular to the procurement—well, not procurement, but the review that is currently going on around how best to support environment groups in Canberra. It is not necessarily related to the work that CSD would do. CSD, I think—or HACS—I do not know what acronym. I call it HACS.

**MS CARRICK:** I thought some of the community groups also had those concerns. I think the—

**Ms Orr:** Yes, well, the things they were raising were very specifically to the environment groups, because I know they have raised them with me too and we have been working through those. I think that is really just down to the fact that this is new, the first time, and everyone is sort of grappling with going through a process they have not gone through before. When we look at the community services and the health side, I think it is fair to say they are far more experienced in procuring these services and the sector is far more experienced in working through these services, and the same sorts of concerns and issues do not necessarily exist as those in the context of the environment groups. I think it is fair to say over all the years I have been in this place there has always been a healthy and ongoing discussion around how best to do these processes. I think one thing I have observed is that we will always improve them but there is always more improvement that can be made, and I think that is acknowledged on all sides.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, I think DVCS has the same concern, and another one. I just think the issue about whether you look at their local knowledge and their local relationships and that this sort of local criteria is included and it is not just a lowest cost type thing—

**Ms Orr:** Yes, so I will hand over to the directorate for this but my understanding—because I do not actually run the procurements—I just set the broader policy, but my understanding is that these things can have weightings within the procurement section.

**Ms Rule:** Yes, so the way in which we do procurement is set by the broader procurement framework which is—I think procurement may have already been before the committee. We are obliged, like every other part of government, to comply with those procurement rules. But part of those procurement rules is setting the criteria on which you will select your preferred supplier and the weighting that will be applied to those criteria. That happens for every procurement process. There are often criteria around some of those things, depending on what the local—what the context is, what the services are that we are procuring.

We absolutely do take it into consideration what the local knowledge is, whether they are an established service provider, how quickly they could be up and running. All of those things are important when you are making procurement decisions. But likewise, new ideas in the market, opening it up to new providers, some competition, those things

are also important. So those are the things that we have to balance when we are making procurement decisions, but those criteria are absolutely laid out at the beginning of the process so that all the people who are participating in that procurement process know what the criteria are that we will assess their tenders or their bids on.

**MS CARRICK:** Are those criteria public?

**Ms Rule:** Yes. Yes, it is part of the procurement process. We are required to. When we go to market we say, “We want to buy a thing and here is the criteria on which we are looking to procure those things.” Then we assess each of the bids against those criteria.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay, so we will be able to see—

**MR RATTENBURY:** Ms Carrick’s question though was, are they public? Now, to get the procurement documents you have to be a registered bidder, do you not?

**Ms Rule:** But they are all published on the procurement website. It is not there—

**Ms Orr:** Is it on Tenders ACT?

**Ms Rule:** Yes, on Tenders ACT. As part of putting out a tender, we put out the criteria, yes.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Okay, yes.

**Ms Orr:** I think, Mr Rattenbury, you might need a login for Tenders ACT but anyone can sign up to get a login.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Yes, but that is what I mean, yes.

**Ms Orr:** Yes, it is still public because there is no restriction as far as I am aware. I mean, you could go—

**THE CHAIR:** But there is a barrier there in terms of you have to actually register and—

**Ms Orr:** Yes, but Mr Cocks, if you hit Google and Tenders ACT you could go sign up and get a login yourself right now and see the criteria so—

**Ms Rule:** But all the people that tender for our services, so the organisations that are putting in a tender, know what the criteria are.

**MS CARRICK:** Well, I mean we heard concerns about it on Community Day. It was not just the environment organisations. It was also, as I say DVCS, and YWCS mentioned it too. So it was a theme that was coming through on the day that they were concerned about.

**Ms Rule:** I mean, local organisations would always prefer that the number one weighted criteria is that we give the work to local organisations. And that is absolutely a key thing but, as I said, there are also instances where bringing in new providers and competition in the market is also a positive. So it is a balance.

**Ms Orr:** Ms Carrick, I think it is also fair to say there is always a very healthy feedback loop between the sector and the government. I think that is actually a positive thing because, again, it is not a set and forget. We will have a look at how we are approaching these processes and we do regularly update the policies and the processes, so without that feedback we cannot go on. It is almost like a continual improvement loop. My view and the conversations I have been having since taking on the portfolio, and even pre-dating that, is I would rather hear the feedback from the sector and hear what they have to say than not hear it, because then we cannot actually consider it and take it on board in how we do things. I guess what I am getting at is I think the sector is quite used to providing feedback because it is invited and welcomed.

**MS TOUGH:** Just going back to what Ms Carrick was asking at the start of the question. I think what she is trying to get at is the SCHADS award is set by the Fair Work Commission. The employers do not really have a say. They are invited into the process but they do not have much of a say, in the end, on how that award wage is set. So it can be quite hard for them to then afford that, or afford to pay above award wages, and it is a female-dominated industry, so it can be very hard for them to have competitive wages and a good wage. So what I am interested in, and I think what Ms Carrick was getting at, is how do those organisations work with government to be funded at a sustainable rate where they can offer pay at that rate or above, and not be worried that trying to afford those pay rises each year is going to be detrimental?

**Ms Orr:** Who is going to jump in first! So I think, Ms Tough, with this one, if I understand the proposition you are making in that question, essentially the question is going to, what do you do about going above award wage?

**MS TOUGH:** It has basically been a government-funded, reliant industry. It can be hard for organisations to get funding for wages or funding for things from other places. How do you make sure that those organisations are sustainable at award rate wages? And, then, how can they, if they are able to, sustain above award wages, given it is a female-dominated industry and so quite a low-paid industry?

**Ms Orr:** On the award wages again, that goes back to the comments we have made previously around the procurement processes and looking at the sectors putting in and saying, “These are the costs that are going to be there.” Plus there is the CSI indexation, which gets applied every year to the multiyear contracts for the government in the human services, which allows for things such as wage increases. Ms Dolan can run you through exactly what that equation does.

As to the above award wages, it is a little bit trickier because there is a level of discretion in there, and we would not necessarily know at any given time what an organisation is negotiating with an individual. I think there is also a question there around the use of public money and what government can do in the sense of going above the award wage, because we have to keep in mind that we cannot just spend money without a reason. It is a little bit hypothetical as to what you would do in those situations, but we do rely on the sector to say, “This is what it will cost us to deliver that service.” So, arguably, if they were employing everyone above award wage then they would be reflecting that in the bid that they put forward. It is not something where we go in and ask.

Going back to the setting of the wages, you made the point that it is a female-dominated industry. That is where the ERO came in. It was actually one of the historic cases that people had been underpaid because it was a feminised industry. That was an uplift across the whole agreement. I believe there is a case on at the moment which is continuing to look at this. Ms Evans and Ms Dolan can probably give you more information because they are the ones that follow this and brief me in the detail of it. I think there are some bigger structural issues there that are playing out in fields that the ACT government would not have a role in from the sense of procuring our services. We can talk a little bit about those, but they are things we monitor and watch so we know what we need to respond to and when. They are not necessarily things that we have policy control over.

**Ms Dolan:** There are a couple of things here. Firstly, the Fair Work Commission, when it looks at its settings, does active consultation across the country that organisations are able to participate in. That is a process that they administer. When it comes to indexation, the ACT government sets the community sector indexation rate each year at the budget, and this year it is at 3.35 per cent. Indexation is set to enable organisations to keep pace with increasing costs. That is an acknowledgement that these things are rising, including conditions like award rates and the rising super guarantee. So that is set to enable organisations to more ably meet those costs. The other way that those costs are considered is in the recontracting process. That is something that government and the community sector both have a responsibility to consider when looking at funding allocated to each contract.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Minister, I think you made the statement earlier that you do not actually do procurements. Is that—

**Ms Orr:** As in I do not run them. I do not personally undertake procurements.

**THE CHAIR:** You do not; so the directorate does?

**Ms Orr:** As in, if there is a tender on Tenders ACT, I am not assessing it, Mr Cocks. That is what I mean.

**THE CHAIR:** Does anything come to you for sign-off?

**Ms Rule:** No. The delegate on procurements, depending on the amount, will be a public servant.

**THE CHAIR:** I just wanted to be absolutely clear. Will you sign off on any procurement proposals? Is there any stage that you get involved in what the directorate would—

**Ms Rule:** We would typically brief the minister on when we intend to go to market, on what we are going to market for and what the scope of the procurement is. That is an information brief. Then, once a procurement decision has been made, we would also brief the minister on what the outcome of the procurement process is. But, again, that is for noting, not for decision.

**THE CHAIR:** So it is more that you would have the discussions before a business case type stage for a particular project?

**Ms Rule:** That is right, and the procurement rules prevent us from actually discussing the ins and outs of the procurement—who bids, what bids there are, how much and all of that stuff—until the process is complete.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. I just wanted to make sure I was understanding what the minister was saying.

**MS TOUGH:** Minister Paterson, I just want to check if affirmative consent is for this hearing.

**Dr Paterson:** No; that was yesterday's.

**MS TOUGH:** Period products?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**MS TOUGH:** Perfect. In 2023 we were the first jurisdiction to legislate access to free period products. Where is this rollout up to and will there be a review into the legislation and the process?

**Dr Paterson:** Thank you for the question. This is Minister Orr's legislation, and we are very proud of this legislation in the ACT, being the first jurisdiction. In 2024, a pilot commenced rolling out period product dispensers at targeted ACT locations to see how that would go. That was three Child and Family Centres—West Belconnen, Tuggeranong and Gungahlin—the Child Development Service, Housing ACT Service Centre, ACT libraries, courts and ACAT. Under the pilot, students could request period products through ACT schools. There were a lot of learnings from that process and pilot.

Throughout the first half of this year, the Office for Women has been working on procurement—undertaking that process to find a supplier to implement the dispensers across a broader range of locations. On 18 June, the territory executed a contract for the provision of dispensers and period products across the ACT. Dispensers are currently being installed in 31 pilot schools, with many complete in time for the commencement of term 3. We are also coordinating with Canberra Health Services to install dispensers at Canberra Health Service sites and promotional materials are being prepared. We are also looking at CIT, and there have been meetings underway to work with CIT in terms of implementing dispensers and period products across their facilities.

So we will keep updating the community and updating the website around how that is progressing. But, so far, it is going really well and is a really important step for our community.

**MS TOUGH:** Wonderful. Is there a review into the legislation scheduled at some point, given it has been a couple of years?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Yes, there was funding committed in an earlier budget to undertake a review of the period products, and that evaluation will be completed this year.

**MS TOUGH:** Wonderful—and, then, fingers crossed, it will expand out further.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes, that is right. That is the plan.

**MS TOUGH:** Wonderful.

**Ms Orr:** I can jump in there. I think the legislation had a three-year review in it.

**MS TOUGH:** Perfect. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I just want to check, Minister—

**Dr Paterson:** Which one?

**Ms Orr:** I think you, but we will see the question.

**THE CHAIR:** When we were talking through the action plan, you pointed out that the Office for Women is not actually specifically responsible for—

**Dr Paterson:** Delivery.

**THE CHAIR:** the vast majority of the actions in there. I think there is only one in the action plan that the Office for Women is actually lead on. Clearly, you have an implementation role in this project.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** What other projects does the Office for Women actually have a lead role in?

**Dr Paterson:** Period products and the grants that I outlined before, and we have the one service contract for Fearless Women. But, if I have left anything else off—

**Ms Bogiatzis:** I think that is right, Minister. The Office for Women also manage contracts like with Fearless Women. They oversee the administration of the ACT Women's Plan and the development of the next one. They also support the Ministerial Advisory Council on Women and really do work across government to kind of promote gender equality.

**THE CHAIR:** I was struggling to find the specific FTE number for the Office for Women. I might have just missed the reference.

**Ms Rule:** Can you just repeat that, please, Mr Cocks?

**THE CHAIR:** What is the FTE for the Office for Women?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The Office for Women is funded for eight FTE.

**THE CHAIR:** Does that include any provision for senior executives?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** No.

**MR RATTENBURY:** I have a quick supplementary on that. When did the Women's Ministerial Advisory Council, which you just mentioned, last meet? Have they met this year? That might be an easier question. I am not looking for a specific date. I want to know what they are up to.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The last ministerial advisory council was from 2023 to 2025, and their term ran until 18 April 2025. The last meeting was in March this year.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Given that their term expired, has a new council been appointed?

**Ms Rule:** No.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Why not?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** We are in the process of reviewing the terms of reference for the council. We want to make sure that the council is in place to support the development of the next ACT Women's Plan. So recruitment will commence once the terms of reference have been updated.

**MR RATTENBURY:** There was obviously a known end date for their terms. Why did the review not commence prior to that end date?

**Dr Paterson:** Change of government—

**MR RATTENBURY:** There was not a change of government.

**Dr Paterson:** Well, change of ministers and—

**MR RATTENBURY:** Which occurred in November.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. I became aware that the ministerial council term was ending. I felt like there was a need to do some work on their terms of reference. I sought feedback from the members of the council, following the end of their term, and received some good feedback in terms of how we can do things better. Their feedback really prompted this review. So we will conduct the review and then go back in terms of what a newly formed council may look like, what their terms of reference will be and what work they will undertake.

**MR RATTENBURY:** A normal protocol in these circumstances, at least in recent years in the ACT government, would be to temporarily extend the term of sitting members for, say, six months, while that review took place. Why did you not choose that approach?

**Dr Paterson:** Because I felt that it was important that we look at how we can revise the

terms of reference. Some of the feedback we got was that the council could work more effectively and efficiently. We will take that feedback do the work and go back to the community with a new plan.

**MR RATTENBURY:** So you are comfortable having no ministerial advisory council for however long it takes you to do this review?

**Dr Paterson:** I am comfortable that we need to do this work and that we will ultimately have a better outcome once this work has been completed and once the new council has been reinstated.

**THE CHAIR:** So, Dr Paterson, you made the decision not to continue with the current council?

**Dr Paterson:** The council's term ended, and the decision was made to conduct a review following feedback given by the members of the council. We will do that review, revise the terms of reference and then go through the process of reinstating a council.

**THE CHAIR:** I will ask it a different way. Minister, were you provided with an option to extend the terms of current members or appoint new members at any time?

**Dr Paterson:** I think that would have been an option. But it was—

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry, the question is not about “would have been”. If you are not sure, you can go back and check. The question is: were you provided with that opportunity?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** So you made a decision—

**Dr Paterson:** As I said, I made a decision following feedback from the members of the council that there are better ways that we could do things and that we need to refine the terms of reference. That council's term ended, and now we are doing that work and we will look to what the future with that council is.

**THE CHAIR:** On what date did you make that decision? I note, you may need to take that on notice.

**Dr Paterson:** It was in April. It was the end of the term. That is when—

**THE CHAIR:** So you did not consider this before the end of the term?

**Dr Paterson:** I considered it before the end of the term, and I wrote to the members and advised them that we would not be continuing with the council in its current form.

**THE CHAIR:** What date did you write to the members?

**Dr Paterson:** We can get that on notice—maybe before the end of the hearing.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Before you made that decision, did you have a plan for how



long you would be without a ministerial council?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The recruitment for the next Ministerial Advisory Council for Women will open later this year. We anticipate that, in early 2026, we will have a council in place.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. But I think the question still stands. Minister, did you before the expiry of that term make a decision on how long it was tolerable to operate without a council?

**Dr Paterson:** This timeframe is tolerable to me, because we can do the work on setting up how the—

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry; I am going to come back again. The question was: did you make a decision before the expiration of that term about how long would be tolerable?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. This timeframe is tolerable to me because—

**THE CHAIR:** Perhaps you might like to take this on notice: what date did you make that decision and how long at that time did you decide would be tolerable to operate without a ministerial council?

**Dr Paterson:** I will get the date when I wrote to the members of the council. But the work that we need to do to review the terms of the reference and review the council and how it has operated previously and how it may operate into the future is important work. That was the feedback that I received from the council members.

**THE CHAIR:** I am not disputing the importance; I am asking about your decisions.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes, and I have stated them. I made the decision that we would not renew the membership of that council; we would do the work to undertake a review of the council and we would reinstate a new council early next year, which will help to advise me on the new development of the next ACT Women's Plan.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay, but I am not convinced we made it to the end of the actual question.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Can I clarify when you expect the review work to be completed in order to have the ministerial council back up and running?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The review of the terms of reference will be completed in the coming months. We hope to then proceed to recruitment once that terms of reference is finalised and to have the new advisory council in place in the new year.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In terms of the coming months, is it possible to get any more specific on that?

**Ms Rule:** We do not have a specific date when that work will be finished. We are working through it now. We will provide advice to the minister when we have worked through that review of the terms of reference. Once a decision is made, we will then

enact that decision.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In the meantime, what decisions were made after the council was dissolved regarding support for women's services, further action on the Women's Plan, the Third Action Plan and ceasing grants that you usually would have consulted the ministerial advisory council on.

**Ms Rule:** Can I just be really clear: this council is not a council that has a statutory role or a decision-making role. It is a consultative mechanism. Part of the feedback from the council was that it needed some revitalisation, if you like. It was not working as well as people wanted it to work anymore and we needed to sort of have a look at what its purpose and what the business of the council is.

I do not think we have a list decisions that we can pinpoint that we would typically have consulted with the council on, because the terms of reference of that council are influx. They do not have a specific decision-making role. I think this is normal course of business in making sure that the mechanisms that we have got to advise us on the work that we are doing and to consult and to provide advice to government are working as effectively as possible. These things have a cost to them, both to us and to the people that are involved in them, and we want to make sure that we are getting best value of our resources and the time that members themselves are contributing. The view was that we were not quite there on this council. So it is not unusual that we would look to revise and revitalise these sorts of arrangements.

I would expect that next year we will be in good shape. But that does not mean that we are not talking to stakeholders and that we are not engaging the particular organisations, and it certainly does not mean that we are not hearing from advocates on some of these issues. I think it is just good administration to make sure that the council, whatever form that takes, is operating as effectively as possible, and that has not been the case.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I absolutely take your point there, but I think what it drills down to is the missed opportunity. I think there is probably an expectation from the people of Canberra—and certainly as a woman, I have the expectation—that there is a functioning ministerial advisory council on decisions. I think some people might make the case that some consultation, even if it is not as efficient as we would like it to be, would still probably be helpful.

**Dr Paterson:** As Ms Rule was saying, there is not any less consultation, discussion or engagement with the sector or with leaders in the sector. It is important that we heard the feedback that this council was not actually working the way it needed to. People felt like their time was being wasted, which is something that we really want to be responsive to. So we need to look at how we do make this council work more effectively, achieve outcomes, have more specific terms of reference and do the important work that it can do.

**MS TOUGH:** On the advisory councils, is the Domestic Violence Prevention Council in that same area? Where is it up with meeting—

**Dr Paterson:** No, that was in yesterday's.

**MR RATTENBURY:** You are the minister responsible, though, aren't you?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**MR RATTENBURY:** You could answer the question.

**MS TOUGH:** It is okay; I can submit it on notice.

**MS CARRICK:** I cannot see the Office for Women mentioned in budget paper C.

**Ms Rule:** They are not specifically mentioned; it is just within our overall resourcing. There is not a particular line item that is Office for Women in the budget papers, I do not think.

**MS CARRICK:** There is not even a mention, let alone just in some text somewhere.

**Dr Paterson:** It does mention it in the text.

**MS CARRICK:** Does it—in budget paper C?

**Dr Paterson:** I am pretty sure.

**MS CARRICK:** If you could tell me what page, that would be good.

**Dr Paterson:** Yes, it says here: "Inclusion and participation for our strategic advice to strengthen the inclusion and participation of all people in Canberra's community, including people from multicultural backgrounds, youth and women."

**MS CARRICK:** Well, it mentions the word "women"; it does not—

**Dr Paterson:** And it mentions youth and multicultural, which is also the other components of this portfolio. That is page 23.

**MS CARRICK:** It mentions those groups all the way through it.

**THE CHAIR:** That is the output. You have just then—

**MS CARRICK:** That is the output.

**Ms Rule:** I do not think there is a requirement for the budget papers to mention the Office for Women. The Office for Women is just a team, if you like, within the directorate. There are many, many teams within the directorate who are not specifically mentioned in our budget statements. It is just a way in which we organise our staff and the work within the directorate. So I do not think it is unusual or controversial that they are not mentioned.

**MS CARRICK:** And there is no accountability indicators for the Office of Women, either?

**Dr Paterson:** There is a strategic objective.

**MS CARRICK:** There is a strategic objective?

**Ms Rule:** Not for the office themselves, because the office is just a group of public servants. The accountability indicators reflect government's accountability for the delivery of programs. Budget papers are not organised in ways that align accountability with teams within the directorate. The portfolios that exist within government dictate how the budget papers are organised.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay. Where are the indicators for women in the budget papers?

**Dr Paterson:** There is Strategic Objective No 5 on page 13:

Promote an antiviolenence culture in the ACT to ensure women feel safe. The directorate works to enhance the status of women and girls in the ACT and to create a community where they feel safe, healthy, equally represented and valued for their contribution to society. This is achieved through the implementation of the Women's Plan and work under—

**THE CHAIR:** Just noting the timing: you are referring to Strategic Objective 5, of that—

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, there is one safety indicator. Is that it—one safety indicator for women?

**Dr Paterson:** Again, this is the directorate's strategic objective, which aligns with my portfolio, which is the Office for Women.

**MS CARRICK:** We have been talking a lot about women and there is one safety indicator. So I just note that. Maybe there could be more.

**Ms Rule:** I think we had this discussion a bit yesterday. But there is absolutely work underway with the establishment of the Health and Community Services Directorate to review the strategic indicators to ascertain whether they continue to be fit for purpose into the future.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay. Thank you.

**MS BARRY:** I understand the need for structures to be reviewed to make sure that they are better. That is what we expect the government to do. So I take that point. But what I am hearing is that the council for women is not as effective as you would have hoped it would be. So my question is: what review and consultation are you currently undertaking to make that council work better and who are you talking to?

**Ms Rule:** I think we have gone to some of this. Some members of the council put to us that the terms of reference have not been set up effectively for the council to work in the best possible way. The review work that we are doing at the moment is: what should those terms of reference look like? We are working through that at the moment and having a look at what we need from that council and how the terms of reference can best reflect that. Therefore, that drives how the council is set up and the work that they do. So the current focus is on the terms of reference. We will then provide advice to the

minister about what that could look like. That will lead to the sort of reforming of the council, based around those terms of reference.

**MS BARRY:** Who are you consulting with in terms of groups?

**Ms Rule:** I can get Ms Akhter to reflect some of the work that we have done to date.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you.

**Ms Akhter:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Ms Barry, we undertook an extensive set of consultations with outgoing members when the minister decided to dissolve the current council. Before the council's term finished, we organised a dedicated session with all outgoing members to collect their views and ideas as to how they consider the council can operate differently, in an improved way, going forward. That feedback has been utilised to inform the current terms of reference review that we are undertaking. Beyond that, we have also had one-on-one discussions with members of the outgoing council. Obviously, we are informed by the stakeholder partners we are working with in the women's space more broadly.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. Who are those stakeholders? Who have you specifically spoken to?

**Ms Akhter:** If I have to name them, I can provide a—

**MS BARRY:** We are happy for you to take it on notice and provide a list of the stakeholders you have consulted in reforming the women's advisory group. I am happy for you to take it on notice.

**Ms Akhter:** I will take it on notice, but I will try to respond to the question before the session finishes.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you.

**Dr Paterson:** To respond to Mr Cock's question, on 14 March I wrote to the members to advise them of the situation.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. We will keep moving. Ms Barry, we are up to your substantive.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. Finally. My question is to the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Given the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the youth justice system, what arrangements are in place to ensure adequate input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives in the processes of the Therapeutic Support Panel?

**Ms Orr:** Ms Barry, thank you for the question. I will look to the directorate on this. The Therapeutic Support Panel is not actually within my portfolio responsibilities, which I know will not make the committee happy, because they will still want to have an answer. I think the last part of your question was: what arrangements are in place around the Therapeutic Supports Panel?

**MS BARRY:** It is about the conversation with the First Nations community and their input into the processes of the Therapeutic Support Panel.

**Ms Rule:** The Therapeutic Support Panel is the portfolio responsibility of Minister Pettersson. I understand we were supposed to cover those topics later today, but they have been deferred. To give you a broad answer to that question in the best way we can now, there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives on the Therapeutic Support Panel. That is a deliberate part of the design of the work. The Therapeutic Support Panel is in place to support the work around raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. That was successfully increased from 1 July to the age of 14. We have First Nations representatives, both individuals and organisations, on the Therapeutic Support Panel to ensure that issues are considered adequately.

We also have scope within the Therapeutic Support Panel to bring in external expertise whenever we need it. We have worked with Aboriginal community controlled organisations to look at particular cases where we might need further support for young people who fall within the scope of that panel.

**MS BARRY:** Which Aboriginal controlled organisations have you worked with?

**Ms Rule:** As I said, this is not a question for this portfolio, so I do not have all the detail with me right now. That is for a different minister in a different hearing.

**Dr Paterson:** Maybe we can take it on notice.

**Ms Orr:** Or when they do the—

**Dr Paterson:** Okay—at the next hearing.

**THE CHAIR:** We are happy to explore it when we have the minister—

**MS BARRY:** Present. Okay. Thank you.

**MR BRADDOCK:** I have some factual questions on multicultural affairs in the absence of the relevant minister.

**Ms Orr:** We will do our best, Mr Braddock.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Thank you. My first question is in terms of the funding for community languages schools and whether there is indexation or year-on-year funding or it has been a flat amount.

**Ms Orr:** I must admit, Mr Braddock, I do not know this off the top of my head, as I am not the responsible minister, so I will fill in time until the officials can take their seat at the table, put up their sign and say that they have understood the privilege statement. I think I have managed to waste enough time to fill that in.

**THE CHAIR:** I just reiterate that we do not need to specifically acknowledge the privilege statement, because it is covered the start.

**Ms Orr:** I know; I was just filibustering, Mr Cocks—

**THE CHAIR:** As was I.

**MR RATTENBURY:** That was a glorious moment of ACT politics!

**Ms Orr:** It is going to be a brilliant part of the *Hansard*!

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Apologies, Mr Braddock—would you mind repeating the question?

**MR BRADDOCK:** Absolutely. My first question is about community languages funding and whether there is any indexation available for that funding, or has it been the same year-on-year?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Thank you, Mr Braddock. Yes; the Community Language School Program has been funded with indexation each year.

**MR BRADDOCK:** And what is that indexation?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** For the 2024-25 financial year, I do not have that detail specifically, but I am sure it will be sent through to me in a moment. It is based on the community sector indexation rate, which is 3.35 per cent.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Thank you. My next question is on multicultural inclusion grants and whether the design of those grants has changed year-on-year or they have stayed the same in terms of the total bucket and the upper limit of those grants available to community groups.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The multicultural inclusion grants have remained at \$197,000 per annum.

**MR BRADDOCK:** How long have they remained at that level?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** For at least the last two years. Ms Akhter may know specifically.

**THE CHAIR:** You can take that on notice if you want to check it.

**Ms Akhter:** I will take that on notice. However, I will provide a response—

**MR BRADDOCK:** Does that include the amount for each individual grant? Does that remain the same, and, if so, for how long?

**Ms Rule:** We will have to take on notice the “how long” component.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Moving on to the Multicultural Festival, I am interested in the incentives in place for local community groups to provide stalls rather than just interstate food companies providing them.

**Ms Rule:** The incentive is that community groups want to be involved in the festival.

Many community groups raise a significant amount of money though running stalls, depending on the nature of what they do. Every year, we are absolutely oversubscribed. I think the premise of your question is that the festival includes interstate and commercial vendors. That is a very small component of the festival landscape. Priority is absolutely given to local community groups. As I said, they are oversubscribed. I would be reluctant to introduce further incentives to community groups to be involved, because we cannot accommodate all of the community groups who currently want to be involved in the festival.

**MR BRADDOCK:** That is interesting because community groups provided that feedback to me about concerns about their ability—

**Ms Rule:** Mr Braddock, I would be really interested to hear specific feedback from specific groups, but, as I said, the criteria for allocating stalls at the festival very much favours local community groups. Not everybody always gets what they want or where they want. There is a whole range of criteria around the festival, but commercial vendors are absolutely a very small part of the festival. It is absolutely a community based festival.

**MR BRADDOCK:** My last question is: what is the ratio of community stores to commercial stores at the festival, and how does that compare with previous years?

**Ms Rule:** We can take on notice the actual numbers, but it is a very small proportion.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Thank you. Those are my questions.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Mr Braddock, I do not have the proportion, but I do have numbers. For the 2025 festival this year, 70 stalls were by community organisations providing food or drinks and 64 were by multicultural or community organisations handing out information or sharing information with the community. Sixty-six stalls were for diplomatic reasons, five were community clubs, 65 were for commercial food or drink sales and 13 were community market stalls, and those obviously had a commercial aspect, because the community groups were selling things. In total, there were 283 stalls at the last festival.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Thank you.

**MS BARRY:** My understanding is that a bond scheme was introduced a few years ago for the Multicultural Festival. I want to find out about the process: how do you collect the bond, how do you refund the bond, and how many bonds are still outstanding from the last festival?

**Ms Akhter:** We have revised the policy. We are not going ahead with the bond policy anymore, because of complexity in administration. The original intent was actually very positive, because we wanted the stallholders to be compliant in keeping the site safe and environmentally safe in particular when the festival finished, because it impacts on residents, businesses and whoever comes to the city. There was a high level of compliance due to that policy being implemented; however, we have revised that position and we will not go ahead. That was an education type policy and we thought we would see how it worked. Because of increase in compliance, we will not go ahead



with it. We would expect that the compliance level will continue because of the policy that we implemented. We continue discussions with the stallholders.

**MS BARRY:** I appreciate that response. I thank you for taking on that feedback, but my question specifically was: what level of bond is outstanding? How many community organisations are yet to receive their bond? I am happy for you to take it on notice.

**THE CHAIR:** I want to see whether any measures are in place to manage the transition out of the previous bond arrangement into whatever new arrangement you have, particularly in terms of the outstanding bond amounts.

**Ms Akhter:** I have a response to Ms Barry's question. We have approximately 20 bonds outstanding, with most of those requiring stallholders to supply additional information. The festival team is working with the stallholders to identify the support they need.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. How did you collect the bond and how are you refunding the bond?

**Ms Akhter:** There is an administrative process, like any process that the government would use for collecting—

**MS BARRY:** What was the process for collecting the bond? It makes sense that, if you collect the bond, you direct debit it into an account. It does not need an additional administrative process if it is the same organisation and the same account. What is the process you applied, and how are you refunding the bond?

**Ms Akhter:** I will defer to our finance area. However, I am trying to identify the—

**MS BARRY:** I am happy for you to take it on notice.

**Ms Rule:** It would be done electronically as part of the payment of fees for stallholders at the festival.

**MS BARRY:** It makes sense, then, that the bond, if there is compliance with requirements, would be automatically debited back to the account. Why are community organisations waiting so long to get their bond back?

**Ms Rule:** I think that Ms Akhter said that 20 are outstanding.

**Ms Akhter:** Only 20.

**Ms Rule:** Only 20 are outstanding, and we are waiting for some kind of compliance activity, which usually involves supply of additional information before we trigger the refund of the bond.

**MS BARRY:** It has been nearly a year.

**Ms Rule:** And we have not yet got the information that we have asked of community organisations. Often with the Multicultural Festival, we find they will not engage with

us until it is time for the next festival. Then they will re-engage. That is the nature of community based organisations. The very small number of organisations that have not yet met the compliance requirements will get their refund if and when they meet those compliance requirements. It is 20 out of hundreds of stallholders, so it is a small number.

**Ms Orr:** Even though it is not in my portfolio, I will still give my two cents worth. Ms Barry, it is probably fair to say that, if community groups are raising concerns with you, it would be fair to connect them with the directorate. I do not think the directorate is purposely trying to hold up return of the bonds; the community groups just have to meet their compliance obligations before that happens. If you are hearing concerns from particular groups and that is prompting your line of questioning, it would be helpful to work with the directorate.

**MS BARRY:** I just want to understand the compliance process.

**Ms Akhter:** Ms Barry, I do not have the exact numbers, but, of the 20, there is a mix of community and commercial organisations. They are not all community groups. It is a usual process, as I said. We invoice. That is the process that we use. But, when we have to return the funds back to the community organisations, they are required to fill in a form to provide additional information so that we can quickly send the funds back. Often they need support with the additional information that we require from them. However, I appreciate the minister's suggestion. I think that is a good one. We are always happy to work with the community organisations when they are struggling, because it is a community-led festival, and we work with them quite well.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. Are you able to provide—and I am happy for this to be taken on notice—the information required for compliance and return of the bond? What information are community organisations required to provide for the bond to be refunded? I am happy for you to take it on notice.

**Ms Akhter:** It would be in the form that they would have to confirm that they have returned the stall in the condition that was expected. It would not be daunting or very difficult for them to provide. The policy implemented at the time was new for the community and also for us. There are always issues that we can deal with differently when we need to implement policies. Those are the things that we are going through. We are very happy to work with community organisations to help them get their funds back as soon as possible.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. Could you please take a notice: for those who had no compliance issues, how long did it take you to refund the bond?

**Ms Rule:** Okay.

**THE CHAIR:** I will jump in with a very quick question because I feel there are two views about what is happening with the bond returns. Ms Rule was suggesting that it is about waiting for outstanding information to be provided, but I was just hearing that the requirements are around return of the stall. Maybe you—

**Ms Rule:** No. I think we are saying the same thing in different ways, Mr Cocks.

Ms Akhter said it is about some information, including verification that they have returned the stall in original condition. There may be other questions that we ask of them, and some organisations have not yet provided that information. It is about information provision.

**THE CHAIR:** Again I suggest taking this on notice: could I get a list of the information requirements that apply to stallholders and a breakdown of which ones have not currently been complied with and are holding up return of bonds?

**Ms Rule:** I think we have already taken on notice the first component: what information is required. Just to be clear on the second component, are you asking for us to provide you with a list of the individual organisations that have not—

**THE CHAIR:** No—just a breakdown. I am interested in whether they are all not complying with the same information requirement or there is—

**Ms Rule:** I think it is just whether they have provided the information. There is a form. Have they returned the form? That is what we are talking about.

**THE CHAIR:** Is that what we are talking about?

**Ms Akhter:** It also includes their bank details, which allows us to actually deliver the funds back.

**Ms Rule:** No—we do not—

**THE CHAIR:** So there is only one information requirement? It is the form, and that—

**Ms Rule:** Yes. This is not an onerous compliance requirement. We have tried to make—

**THE CHAIR:** It was starting to sound like it could be.

**Ms Rule:** Yes. We have tried to make it as simple as possible. We do not have their bank details, Ms Barry, because, when they pay us, we do not see their bank details. They have our bank details and they pay us, but that does not tell us what their bank details are.

**MS BARRY:** Okay.

**Ms Rule:** We need those details. We need them to tell us which account they want us to put the funds back into. We are asking stallholders for very basic information, and some organisations have not got around to sending the form back.

**MS BARRY:** Wouldn't it have made sense to ask them, as part of the application process, to put all of that through? Wouldn't that be a better way of doing it?

**Ms Rule:** Perhaps in hindsight, but that is not what we did. We also still need the additional information from them—ticking the checklist: “Did you return the stall as you were required to? Did you meet all the compliance requirements? And where would you like us to refund the money?” We could do it either way, but the issue is not what

is on the form; the issue is whether they have returned the form. It is not complicated.

**MS BARRY:** How much is the bond?

**Ms Akhter:** It is very minimal. It is around \$200. It depends on the size of the stall.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Ms Rule, you mentioned that there is a waiting list for having a community stall at the Multicultural Festival. Roughly, how many groups are on that waiting list?

**Ms Rule:** It is not a waiting list. We open applications and we always have more applications than we are able to accommodate. It is not that we have a waiting list for next year. We say, “Applications are open now for stalls at the Multicultural Festival. We have—” whatever the number is for that given year, and there are always more people putting their hands up for stalls than we have stalls available.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Fair enough. Roughly, how many more apply than you have spaces available?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** For the 2025 festival, we had 470 applications across the range that I spoke to earlier, and 283 received a stall. There are categories. We want to make sure there is a balance of community groups and volunteers, and commercial groups are obviously at the bottom of that list.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you. Is there any scope to accommodate those additional groups with an expansion or is the view that we cannot grow the festival anymore?

**Ms Rule:** As you are aware, the footprint of the festival has grown substantially over the last couple of years. We will have some challenges next year because of construction in Garema Place. It changes from year to year, depending on what is happening within the city footprint. We have looked at a whole range of options, but there is also a cost impact. The bigger it gets the greater the cost. We are constantly balancing the footprint that we can accommodate with the money we have available and the demand. We feel pretty good about what the footprint looks like. The feedback on the expansion into Glebe Park, for example, has been overwhelmingly positive, despite some early resistance by people who did not want to be pushed out to Glebe Park. It is now seen as a real positive, both for stallholders and for attendees at the festival. We have kind of run out of room that we can feasibly expand into without significantly changing the nature of the festival. At this point, we are happy with the footprint of the festival, but we will have some challenges with where Garema Place is up to for the coming 2026 festival.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Chair, could I respond to Mr Braddock’s earlier question in relation to multicultural inclusion grants and the amounts that have been provided over the years. I mentioned that, for the past two years, the grant value had been \$197,000. In the three years prior to that, it had been \$180,000. So the past two years have seen an increase.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Miss Nuttall, we are up to your substantive.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I would like to chat about LGBTIQA+. Ms Orr, you are now the minister responsible. Have you met with the advisory council for LGBTIQA+ affairs since taking on this responsibility?

**Ms Orr:** The short answer is no. I took on responsibility on 1 July. I have been briefed. I have received incoming briefs from the directorate. I have met with a few stakeholders. The next meeting of the council is upcoming and in my diary, and, in line with that, I will meet with them when the meeting is on. As with some of the other councils, the chair might meet with me in advance of that. I think that is the process for this one. I must admit that I read my diary usually a week in advance, because it is quite full and overwhelming. I am looking to Tina about whether the chair will meet with me in advance. I am happy for them to meet with me in advance. It is not a problem. If it is not in the diary, we will get it in there. I know the meeting is in the diary. I will meet with them when they have their next scheduled meeting.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I appreciate that you have a busy diary. How often does the council meet, and how often do you expect that you will meet with the council as part of your responsibility?

**Ms Orr:** That is a good question.

**Ms Connor:** Do you want me to answer that?

**Ms Orr:** Is it quarterly?

**Ms Connor:** Yes. I have read and understood the privilege statement. The LGBTIQA+ Ministerial Advisory Council meets once every six weeks or so—about six times a year. The minister is obviously welcome to attend.

**Ms Orr:** Miss Nuttall, I am in the council's hands. If they invite me along, I am happy to come, should my diary allow for it. There have been some instances where I have been interstate for a ministerial meeting, for example, or it has been a sitting day and I have not been able to attend meetings when invited. The chair and the deputy chair will often meet with me if there is anything they want to discuss. I usually leave it at their discretion to reach out and use their judgement if there is something they wish to flag with me outside of those meetings.

**Ms Rule:** We would typically brief the minister in the lead-up about what is on the agenda for the meeting, and then, post the meeting, if the minister was unable to attend, we would brief the minister on what the key issues and outcomes of the meeting were.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That is great to know. On the Office of LGBTIQA+ Affairs more broadly, would you be able to outline, in practical terms, what the incorporation of the Office of the LGBTIQA+ Affairs into the new Health and Community Services Directorate will mean for the functioning of the office?

**Ms Rule:** The office have transitioned into the new directorate as a whole entity. They were picked up from Chief Minister's directorate and moved into the new Health and

Community Services Directorate. We are currently working through the longer term structure of the new directorate. At the moment they are placed in the inclusion part of the directorate, which includes all the other offices that we have talked about today—disability, multicultural, women et cetera—because we think that is the most aligned part of the directorate, which is really focused on particular cohorts of Canberrans and where we have different arrangements in place for targeting the needs of those individual cohorts.

The team has come across. I have met with them. We have had some good early discussions. They are pretty enthusiastic about being in the directorate. Change is always difficult, but I appreciate the enthusiasm that the team has brought to both their work—and it is very clear that they are very passionate about the work they do—and embracing the change and the opportunity to come to a different directorate which has a different focus from where they may have previously sat.

It has been very positive, and I appreciate, particularly, as I said, the enthusiasm of the staff and the dedication of the leadership of that group to put it all on a very good footing.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That is extremely exciting. About \$5 million, I believe, is budgeted for this transition over the next four years. I would be interested in understanding what this funding is designed to address.

**Ms Orr:** Is this the \$5 million to fund the office?

**MISS NUTTALL:** Yes.

**Ms Orr:** This is a transfer of funding that was against the budget when they were in CMTEDD, and it has been transferred over to HCSD to reflect the ongoing operation of the office.

**MISS NUTTALL:** The same quantum as before, essentially?

**Ms Orr:** Yes. It is changing the cost base from the directorate they were in to the directorate they are now in.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Have you found in previous years that cost to be sufficient to meet the needs of running the office and supporting—

**Ms Orr:** Miss Nuttall, it is fair to say that every section that reports to me and every other minister will always tell you they are happy to take more money and do more things, if you give them the opportunity. I make the observation that, from everything I have seen since the office has come under my ministerial responsibilities, they are very enthusiastic, and they do very good, quality work. There is no shortage of work in this area, as is the case in many areas. The things that the office is focusing on are those critical things which will make a real difference for the community. I think the work is prioritised in the right direction, and we will continue to work through those things.

There is a really good opportunity, with having the office in the new Health and Community Services Directorate, in that a lot of the work they do will actually be done

through the Health and Community Services Directorate, and there will be symmetries with other work that is going on. It will allow those conversations to be joined up a little bit more—not that they were not before, because the office is very active in representing the views and progressing their work. It brings it together in a little bit more of a holistic way.

One of the things in my mind, and one of the things I am discussing with the officials, is how we can start to realise some of these opportunities from other symmetries, and with all these things coming together.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Looking specifically at the “A” in LGBTIQA+ more broadly among directorates, my office has heard reports from members of the asexual, aromantic and agender communities that some directorates are not yet necessarily using the full LGBTIQA+ acronym; they are omitting the “A” in some contexts, or they are sometimes just referring to “asexual” rather than the full “ace” umbrella.

**Ms Orr:** This is one of the education processes that we go through not just in this office but in a range of them, as to how we can increase the understanding and capability across government of the groups that we are representing. Tina can probably work through a little more of the detail regarding the conversations that the office has been having in building that capability and understanding across the public service, which we would not necessarily be doing if we did not have the good work of things like the office there to do it.

**Ms Connor:** Earlier this year, we released an inclusive communications guide, which was designed for the ACT public service. It is also available publicly, so anyone in the community can access that as well. That is part of the education piece around updating the acronym and, in general, teaching people how to be inclusive in their comms.

We still, from time to time, spot things where the acronyms are not used correctly, and we take the opportunity to correct them, when we see those. People from across the service also reach out directly for advice, which we are happy to provide, and educate. As Minister Orr said, it is definitely an education piece that we are working through.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Can I confirm that the government has a policy of using the full acronym in all their government communications and across directorates?

**Ms Connor:** Yes, that is correct.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I am really glad to hear that.

**Ms Orr:** I think it is fair to say that we are on a continual improvement journey of realising that policy, but that is part of the journey. If you find somewhere that does not use the full acronym, Miss Nuttall, always feel free to let us know, and I will send the office out to educate them.

**Ms Connor:** We are happy to do that.

**MISS NUTTALL:** The 2024-26 action plan for the Capital of Equality Strategy included a plan to deliver an annual “Ride with Pride” campaign. Do you have oversight

of that in the Office for LGBTIQA+ affairs?

**Ms Orr:** I will now, but I think I came to the portfolio a little bit late to have the full pride experience as the minister this time around. Ms Connor can probably run through that for you.

**Ms Connor:** Yes. The “Ride with Pride” campaign is administered by what was TCCS, which is now City and Environment Directorate. They do consult with us. It is generally done in June, for Pride Month. We participate in the consultation about the design of the artwork that goes on either the light rail or the bus. This year, it went on both. Yes, we are involved in that every year.

**MISS NUTTALL:** What does that entail, for people that might not be aware of “Ride with Pride”?

**Ms Connor:** Basically, it is a visibility measure. If we are putting it out on public transport, it gives people the opportunity to learn about the work that the government is doing. This year, it had a link to the Capital of Equality website and our Facebook page, so it is really about that, and so that people can celebrate pride.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In terms of visibility campaigns, the last one, which I thought was really lovely, was a recent public information campaign that went out to the community. Have you been getting good feedback about that program so far?

**Ms Connor:** Are you referring to the “Unsaid Says A Lot” campaign?

**MISS NUTTALL:** Yes, that is the one.

**Ms Connor:** It is very early days for that one. That only commenced in June, and we have just commenced our paid campaign for that. It is probably a little bit early to say, in terms of feedback.

**Ms Orr:** Maybe have a chat to us at the annual reports hearing.

**Ms Connor:** Yes.

**MISS NUTTALL:** How much funding was allocated in this budget?

**Ms Connor:** I might come back on that one, if that is all right.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That is fine, if it needs to be taken on notice.

**Ms Connor:** It is \$45,000.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you very much.

**MR EMERSON:** On Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, during annual reports hearings earlier this year, the head of OATSIA spoke about the government having prioritised the Productivity Commission’s essential action 3.1, which requires the development of a transformation strategy to accelerate the implementation of the



national agreement. I believe it was to be completed before the end of June. Is that ready? Has that been published somewhere?

**Ms Orr:** I will take a step back, on the transformation strategy. It is something that I have put a lot of thought into, and into looking at how we progress that strategy, while also knowing that the Indigenous-led review was coming out; we have now received that, and the joint council is working through their response to it.

Noting that there is a whole range of views and a lot of work to coordinate it, it was my view that perhaps we needed to be a little bit more—I will use the word “ambitious”, because that is the first one that comes to mind, in the government transformation project. While there is good work going on in some places, it is not consistent in bringing it up to that level. It is about providing the support, capability and capacity to help people as they transition through this area. It is about asking line areas to think and to challenge themselves in a way they have not necessarily done before.

All of these thoughts came together. As I hope you are aware, in the last sitting before we broke for the winter break, I said that we were setting up a subcommittee of cabinet to work through Closing the Gap reforms, with a particular focus on the government transformation strategy. We are hoping to bring a lot of that work through the committee, to bring not only consistency but also support, as we go through it, and look at how we can coordinate it better across government. We also have the Strategic Board there, to support the subcommittee and get those lines of communication, as we look at what is quite a big piece of work.

**MR EMERSON:** The strategy has been postponed; was that a ministerial decision?

**Ms Orr:** The strategy is in development, with the hope that it will be even better than what would have been the case.

**MR EMERSON:** We also spoke about the whole-of-government response to the Productivity Commission’s recommendations more broadly. The indication in the annual reports hearings was that that would be provided in May this year. Is that report available somewhere?

**Ms Orr:** Yes, it is. It was tabled in the last sitting.

**MR EMERSON:** That is on the national agreement, the Productivity Commission review?

**Ms Orr:** Yes. With the reporting, I have reflected back on that first hearing, with me being quite new to the portfolio, and with others, including yourself, being new to the Assembly. When I go back and look over that, it is not unreasonable to say that there was a little bit of confusion around different bits and pieces, and perhaps that meant there was not so much clarity in the answering of the questions, and there is the confusion that has come from that.

**MR EMERSON:** Where is the report on the Productivity Commission review? I know the joint council has discussed the timeline. That has been agreed.

**Ms Orr:** Yes.

**MR EMERSON:** I am wondering whether that is available, and I just have not seen it.

**Ms Orr:** I think we have different ideas of what the report is. When I say “the report”, sometimes you have a different view of what that should look like. What we have put up is the report that we agreed with joint council, and part of it was because joint council was delayed in agreeing on the reporting. That was the annual report that I tabled in the Assembly, and I am hoping you have a copy of it. If you do not, I am happy to provide you with one. If there is information in it which does not answer the questions you have, as always, I am happy to have a discussion.

We report into joint council. Joint council does a combined report. That is what we then put out, and it gets published. If there is something in that process, noting that it is a national one, and I think your question is really focused on the ACT—

**MR EMERSON:** Yes, I am asking about our response. I did not know whether that would go to joint council and then be made public, or if it goes to joint council and is made public simultaneously.

**Ms Orr:** Our response goes into the joint council response. All states and territories provide information into the joint council, so ours is in there. If there is information or a level of detail that are not reflected in that, which you are after, the door is always open to come and have a chat.

**MR EMERSON:** Thank you. Separately, on a different agreement, the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement, we also spoke in the annual reports hearings about the timing of phase 3. It was originally scheduled to commence in January 2024. That was pushed out to January this year. In the hearing, the indication was that it would start on 1 July this year—four weeks ago today. Has phase 3 commenced?

**Ms Orr:** This work was done in unison with the Elected Body. The most recent briefing to me—if there is anything further to update, I am sure the officials will jump in—was that the Elected Body was still in those discussions, that phase 3 was still being finalised and that it is coming to me. We have been respectful of the request from the Elected Body to allow more time.

**MR EMERSON:** The slowdown, if you will, is the Elected Body’s responsibility?

**Ms Orr:** It has not come to me. I will hand over to officials to give the details.

**Ms Sabellico:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. In relation to phase 3, there was some further conversation with the Elected Body as we were approaching the deadline in terms of looking at requiring some more time. There were conversations between us and the Elected Body in terms of what that could look like, noting that they also needed to provide a whole lot of review of what it was that each of the directorates was undertaking.

The member representatives who have different allocated directorates were in the

middle of having conversations about what some of that would look like and were, appropriately, challenging some of the ways in which people were conceiving of it. We are now on a path, with a number of them, where the Elected Body is still very much working with us to get the best product. We need to have some further conversations with the Elected Body in terms of the look and feel of the final product as it relates to the agreement, because each directorate is doing their own, and that needs to come together in terms of a focus area plan as well.

**Ms Orr:** Mr Emerson, you made the comment that the slowdown is because of the Elected Body. I want to clarify—I do not think you were meaning this—that there is no criticism of the Elected Body for taking the time to do the due diligence, and we have been respecting that.

**MR EMERSON:** It is almost sitting with them?

**Ms Rule:** It is a partnership.

**Ms Orr:** Yes.

**Ms Rule:** We work in partnership with them, and we will continue to work through processes to get the next phase in place.

**MR EMERSON:** Do we have a new target start date?

**Ms Orr:** Has the Elected Body provided any—

**Ms Sabellico:** I know that the branch manager for OATSIA met with the Elected Body just before they went on leave last week, and I have not had an update. I have asked to have a conversation with the Elected Body prior to looking at finalising the date.

**MR EMERSON:** Quite specifically, did the Elected Body request a delay in the commencement date?

**Ms Rule:** I think it is a negotiation. This agreement is a negotiation. I do not want to frame this as being their fault or our fault. It is a partnership; it is a negotiation. Both parties are absolutely committed to getting the best possible outcome for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans, in terms of what is in those plans. We have agreed jointly to take the time that we need to get it right.

**MR EMERSON:** The Auditor-General's report on the implementation of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement indicated the part-time nature of positions on the Elected Body has been limiting in terms of its effectiveness. Are we considering funding OATSIA members in a full-time capacity?

**Ms Orr:** That would be a decision for government, and that decision has not been taken, so I will not speculate.

**MR EMERSON:** I have not been able to find a reconciliation action plan for HCSD.

**Ms Rule:** We do not have a reconciliation action plan. It is a very interesting discussion.

Some directorates in the ACT government do and some do not. There are mixed views from the community and from across the public sector about the value of reconciliation action plans. That had a place at a point in time.

In addition to the cabinet committee that the minister referred to, we have a parallel committee in the public service that I chair. It is a subcommittee of the Strategic Board. That committee had a discussion about reconciliation action plans and we have asked for some advice about what the whole-of-government position is. We have tried at various times—we operate as one service—to get Reconciliation Australia to agree that we would have an ACT public service reconciliation action plan, but they have not been willing to agree to that.

There is lots of consideration going on. We have a cultural integrity statement that reflects the principles that the Health and Community Services Directorate will apply to its work. It has similar content in it to a reconciliation action plan. But reconciliation action plans have a certain format and reporting requirements.

It is a bit contested about what the current thinking is around reconciliation action plans, but it is under active consideration.

**MR EMERSON:** Does every other directorate have one, or do you—

**Ms Rule:** It is mixed.

**MR EMERSON:** Some do; some do not?

**Ms Rule:** Some do; some do not. That is right.

**MR EMERSON:** Would you be able to provide, on notice, the list of which do and which do not? It might be tricky with the MoG changes.

**Ms Rule:** Yes, it probably is tricky with the MoG.

**MR EMERSON:** Did ACT Health have one?

**Ms Rule:** I will have to take that on notice. Mr Emerson, if it is suitable, we might provide a list of directorates that had them in June.

**MR EMERSON:** That is probably helpful.

**Ms Rule:** As we go into the new machinery of government arrangements, there will be that consideration across the service about what the common approach is.

**MR EMERSON:** We have had a few different things pushed back. I suppose the response I am getting from you, Minister, is that you have this new portfolio; you are diving in and getting engaged, which I think is fantastic, and that is the sense that I have received from you privately as well. What is at the root of the pushbacks in timelines that we are seeing across the board? Is it about the difficulty of playing this cross-government coordination role for OATSIA—getting information from everywhere and then sending it back out?

**Ms Orr:** If you were to whittle it down to one thing, I would say it is the complexity of the issues that we are responding to. With respect to holding a number of portfolios, there are complexities in all of them, but this one has a very long history. The change that we and other governments are being asked to do is probably outside most people's comfort zones. It is new thinking. It is challenging thinking. It is important thinking and change.

With these things, we sign up with the best intentions—at least, the ACT has. I will leave other jurisdictions to reflect on their own intentions. We want to get that reform, close the gap and improve the lives of the community here.

As we start to do this work, though, we start to see there are a lot of things that we did not anticipate. As our understanding grows, the complexity grows with it. As we work through those challenges, you can either put in place a timeline that says, "We will do this by this date," or you can interact with the substance of it and work through. I think we are seeing that.

I have observed, since I have had the portfolio, and my understanding has grown through having the portfolio, that everyone is grappling with this. That is why we see things like the health institute report saying, "Here are the underlying factors," in a whole range of areas where all states and territories are not necessarily performing how we would like to be performing, or on the targets that we have set, and "Here are some of the underlying factors that we can start looking at," and I think this is part of the process.

Our understanding and knowledge will grow, as we start to challenge ourselves and look at those issues that are there, in a way that we have not done. It is part of the journey, to be honest.

**MR EMERSON:** I hope you can understand my questioning. With the national agreement, we are five years on; with the ACT agreement, we are six years on. I agree that I am new to this. It is frustrating for committee members to hear things like, "We're starting to grapple with X, Y and Z," when pretty clear agreements have been made. That is where I am coming from, and trying to understand, when OATSIA has a coordinating function, and when the Office for Women have a coordinating function, whether that is working effectively. Is OATSIA frustrated? I am trying to understand it.

**Ms Orr:** Again, I do not think it is the case that, if we coordinated better, we would suddenly understand it. It is about the bigger social issues and the change that is there. If we say, "This is what we think will work," we then see that something might not work. I see that with the community, too. There are learnings that have been taken, and where the community will say, "We need to refine this," or "We need to take a slightly different approach." I think that is a lot of the work that is going on now, and it is part of the discussion.

In my mind the choice there is to think, "We've got this deadline against the targets and we have to focus solely on that," or we allow there to be the space to have those other variables and factors, as you work through them and these things come up.

**MR EMERSON:** Both.

**Ms Orr:** It is probably both. Do you do the hard work and allow that to play out or do you just focus on the target? Sometimes that is the problem that comes up. My preference would always be to focus on the hard work and get the result.

**MS BARRY:** I am interested in understanding whether there has been funding for the children's commissioner to have a case management system in her office. At the last annual reports hearings, she had asked for that.

**Ms Rule:** It is not us, Ms Barry. It is the JACS Directorate; it is in a different portfolio.

**MS BARRY:** What portfolio?

**Ms Orr:** The Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People is under the JACS portfolio.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. I am interested in the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee. What investment in the budget specifically addresses the reduction in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people being referred to CYPS? That is not you, either.

**Ms Rule:** That is Minister Pettersson.

**THE CHAIR:** I want to ask about something that comes from some of the earlier discussions. In a lot of what we have been talking about, we are dealing with units that have a largely coordination and whole-of-government role. What do you have in place to make sure that the worthy policy objectives of all these things—I think it is largely business units—is part of a properly connected system, so that you are getting all the information you need back from directorates to make sure you are not just setting out worthy objectives and leaving it up to someone else to try and achieve it?

**Dr Paterson:** We have reporting on the Women's Plan and evaluation of each of the objectives. Directorates report back to the Office for Women on the progress of each of those objectives.

**THE CHAIR:** For the Office for Women, do you take an active step once you get that information back, or is it just monitoring?

**Dr Paterson:** We publicly report it, and monitor. You can see it online; it talks about "in progress" or "completed"—different measures.

**THE CHAIR:** I am interested in course correction.

**Ms Rule:** In a general sense, for most of these functions where the Health and Community Services Directorate has a coordinating role, there is an overarching plan that has been set by government, that says, "These are the things that we're going to do," whether that is the Women's Plan, the agreement with the Elected Body, the commitments to Closing the Gap, or whatever it might be. We have a number of plans

and frameworks in place. Those plans set out what we are going to do. They guide government decision-making in budgeting, as to where funding will be allocated.

Once government makes a decision under the guise of that plan to do a thing, that thing may not be our responsibility. It is often the responsibility of another directorate. In terms of reporting against those plans, we will seek information from other directorates. We will report against the plan. Those things go to cabinet for discussion. The responsible minister usually either tables or makes a statement in the Assembly about our progress against those plans, and they are the basis on which future budget decisions are made.

Our role is to set those plans and to have cross-government arrangements in place—inter-directorate committees or whatever it might be—to make sure that the objectives of the plan that government has set are being achieved, and that we are getting the reporting we need on the individual initiatives under those plans.

**THE CHAIR:** How do you make sure, across these sorts of plans, that essentially one minister is responsible and accountable for achieving that, rather than losing all accountability, and everyone, theoretically, being responsible for achieving everything?

**Dr Paterson:** The plan will be evaluated. We are about to start that process. That will look at how effective the plan has been and the processes with which the plan is implemented. That will report back in terms of how we can improve things. Ultimately, I am the minister with responsibility for the delivery of the ACT Women's Plan and the development of the new plan.

**THE CHAIR:** And for achieving the policy objectives?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** That, I assume, would apply across the various other pieces of whole-of-government coordination—the relevant minister for the whole-of-government piece of work?

**Dr Paterson:** If those different projects in the action plans are not completed, there will be questions to answer, and that is the holding to account.

**Ms Orr:** It will be both, Mr Cocks. It will be the minister who has the responsibility for implementing it, and there is still scrutiny on the minister. They are not absolved of their responsibility. It will be the minister with the overall policy, too.

**THE CHAIR:** We have just heard two different answers to the same question, which is precisely the problem I had. Minister Paterson said that, as the minister responsible for the Women's Plan, she is responsible for achieving the policy objectives. You seem to have just said, Ms Orr, that—

**Ms Orr:** Yes, the responsible minister who is part of coordinating, so it is consistent—

**Dr Paterson:** It is a whole-of-government plan. I am responsible for the plan being effectively delivered and implemented.

**THE CHAIR:** When you say “delivered”, do you just mean written?

**Dr Paterson:** No. Each of the directorates is busy working through the different things and different programs that are associated with the plan. They report back regularly—yearly, I believe—and it is all online, the reporting back, in terms of how these projects are progressing.

**THE CHAIR:** I am talking about the policy objectives, not just the specific, detailed, line-by-line items. They all contribute to the overarching policy objectives.

**Ms Orr:** The subtlety here, Mr Cocks, is that, in achieving the policy objectives, you also need to achieve the actions you have put in place to deliver those.

**THE CHAIR:** Absolutely, which is at the heart of the question.

**Dr Paterson:** Which is why we are evaluating—

**THE CHAIR:** How do we stop the accountability disappearing between multiple ministers?

**Dr Paterson:** I am saying I am accountable for the Women’s Plan. I have said that.

**Ms Orr:** The accountability comes through the fact that we have these plans and these actions; there is someone who is responsible for those actions, and you know who is doing them, and you can say, “What are you doing, when you do the reporting, to show that these things are on track?” We have ended up in a very complex discussion, but it is actually quite a straightforward proposition, in that the minister coordinates and has responsibility for an overarching plan and the setting of the policy directions. When you are working with a whole-of-government response, everyone who has responsibility under that plan has the responsibility to deliver on it.

**MS CARRICK:** With the overarching responsibility for the Women’s Plan, do you have visibility of all the finances? With the budgets in each directorate and the reporting of how they are spending it, do you get all of that coming back, in order to do a report on the finances across the Women’s Plan? Can you reallocate funds across directorates to meet emerging needs or identify savings? Do you have that ability?

**Ms Rule:** No. I think we had this discussion at the last round of hearings. Money is appropriated to the individual ministers for individual measures. They are responsible for the delivery of the measure within the money that they have been appropriated, through all the accountability mechanisms that are set across government. Any decisions to reallocate funds or for funds on a particular measure to go up or down is governed by a set of processes around budget reviews and ERC. The minister responsible for the Women’s Plan is not responsible for every dollar spent on women’s measures. That is actually appropriated to the relevant minister for a particular measure through budget processes.

**MS CARRICK:** Appropriated to the directorate; so if there are savings in a particular Women’s Plan action item, can the director-general reallocate that money to somewhere



else in the directorate?

**Ms Rule:** Money is appropriated to directorates to deliver the priorities set by government. There are ups and downs within that money, but any significant variation from the budget has to go through ERC for decision, in terms of reallocating that money.

**MS CARRICK:** You say “significant”; what is the threshold?

**Ms Rule:** These are questions for Treasury, Ms Carrick. I am not responsible for the budget process.

**MS CARRICK:** No, but you have your directorate, so you must have some flexibility within your directorate to reallocate funds.

**Ms Rule:** Very limited. I have discretion around, for example, funding that is allocated to FTE in the Office for Women. I might decide that we need one of those people to go and help on a thing over here. I can move people around, and the resources that we have available, but in terms of actual dollars for things like grant funding, events or particular things, I have very limited discretion over how I spend that.

**Ms Orr:** Those are usually tied to an ERC decision, a decision of cabinet, so the directorate has to act within the remit of those decisions. It cannot say, “Here’s this funding for X. We’re now going to put it into Z.”

**Dr Paterson:** Also, the range of measures in the action plans are diverse, so some of these measures will fall under the directorates’ basic work plans. Others will need significant new funding. For example, in the support for the mental health and wellbeing of women and girls in the ACT, one of the measures is to develop and commence implementation of the Mental Health Workforce Strategy action plan. That will have a range of measures. Some will be business as usual; some will perhaps require funding.

The second measure is completion of the new eating disorders residential clinic. That is a discrete funded project. There is a whole raft of things. There is legislation in here; there are plans. There are design guidelines and there are education programs. There is a raft of measures. The idea with the Women’s Plan is that it is diverse in what it is trying to achieve in its objectives. This is the third action plan, so there are two that have gone before it. This is part of a 10-year strategic direction in terms of how we start to change things in the ACT and improve gender equity.

**THE CHAIR:** We might wind 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*. The committee will now suspend the proceedings for a break.

**Hearing suspended from 11.18 to 11.31 am.**

Appearances:

Icon Water

Hezkial, Mr Ray, Managing Director  
Yau, Ms Joy, Chief Financial Officer  
Pratt, Ms Alison, General Counsel  
Dennis, Mr Peter, Deputy Chair, Icon Water Board

Evoenergy

Sachse, Mr Sam, Acting General Manager  
Juhasz, Mr Tim, Group Manager Network Services  
Keraitis, Mr Tomas, Group Manager Strategy and Operations  
Wilcox, Ms Megan, General Manager Economic Regulation  
Kerr, Mr Mark, Group Manager Customer Delivery

**THE CHAIR:** We welcome witnesses from Icon Water and Evoenergy. 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 am doing a bit of fact-finding today, trying to understand some of the things going on. Page 217 of budget statement B has the statement: “Icon Water will need to source new debt and/or refinance existing debt in relation to both water and sewerage and energy investment businesses, which will be subject to market interest rates.” I was hoping someone could elaborate on that statement and the primary driver behind needing to refinance that debt.

**Mr Hezkial:** Perhaps some context for what is coming up for us in terms of investment might help, and then I might refer some of the more detailed responses to Joy. We are coming up to quite an investment hump at Icon Water. If you consider that most of our infrastructure here in the ACT was built around the 1970s and 1960s—that is typically when the ACT did most of its expanding—a lot of our infrastructure is now long-lived and we are now entering that investment hump.

If you look at our capital investment profile, over the next couple of regulatory periods, it is quite heavily weighted towards wastewater system investment, specifically down at our Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre, and some major elements of the process treatment there that will be replaced. By 2030 is when that investment is required. Some of that investment is related to renewal, but predominantly it is growth here in the ACT. Two key elements of our wastewater treatment process that are being invested in is our bioreactors, which is a sub-element of our treatment process, and the other one is related to our biosolids treatment process, which is how we remove the solid byproduct of the wastewater treatment process. Right now we have an incinerator that is reaching end of life. Those are two key elements of our capital program. So we really are seeing a major step-up in our investment program.

A typical regulatory period prior to this period would have been somewhere in the order of \$400 million. In our current regulatory period we are looking at around \$700 million. So that gives you a feel for the step-up. That investment will continue into the regulatory

period beyond that. But I might just hand over to Joy to give a bit more colour to that.

**Ms Yau:** I will expand on what Ray just covered there. From a debt perspective, at Icon Water, we access all of our debt through from ACT government Treasury and that funds not only our business but also the ActewAGL Joint Venture business. In that includes our capex program, as Ray just spoke to, our dividend as well as the ActewAGL Joint Venture.

From a debt perspective, there is a legislative instrument from the Treasurer. That approves up to a maximum of \$2.095 billion in borrowings and that is the face value. As at 30 June 2025, we have approximately \$1.845 billion of debt. Every July, the ACT government Treasury increases our legislative instrument to make sure that that ceiling, if you like, continues to move as needed.

Essentially, to your question around the drivers of us needing to refinance, our debt, which is the \$1.845 billion that I just referenced, is made up of multiple tranches. As each of those debt tranches mature we refinance those as well as then having any additional new borrowings each year to finance, whether it is capex or dividends et cetera. So that is how the debt structure works.

**THE CHAIR:** Is that operating then on essentially interest-only—so, in effect, we get to the end of one period and then we just refinance and add more? Is that how that works?

**Ms Yau:** Not quite. Each of the tranches of debt has different terms and so different maturities. To give you an example of the next one, which is upcoming in May 2026, that is \$125 million of face value and matures at that time. Ahead of then, we actively work with ACT government Treasury to make sure that we refinance that at that time. Then, if you look at the profile of the other components, just to give you a flavour, it is like 2028, 2030, 2031, 2034 et cetera. So it is spaced out over time and, as each debt instrument matures, that is when each one of those gets refinanced. In all of the intervening years, if we do need additional borrowings to finance our dividend or our capex program we would also work with ACT government Treasury for additional borrowings.

**THE CHAIR:** So the debt that you hold, does that all land in the government's overall reporting of debt, or is that separate to the numbers that they report?

**Ms Yau:** From my understanding, yes, that is, from a government perspective, in terms of the overall debt. We essentially borrow via ACT government Treasury and it comes through to us. We then pay the interest on that and we pass that through to ACT government Treasury. So, essentially, all of it comes through via the Treasury team.

**MS CARRICK:** It is not GGS—it is not the general government sector—but it is part of the total territory borrowings?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, I think that is what you were saying?

**Ms Yau:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** There was a part of what you were saying there that I was not quite clear on it. I think you said that there is debt financing for dividends, which clearly goes back to the government. How does that work on the balance sheet?

**Ms Yau:** Our dividend policy is 100 per cent dividend policy, excluding gifted assets. Each year, from our profit and loss perspective, we have our net profit after tax. We then exclude gifted assets and then everything left over is 100 per cent dividend policy coming back through to ACT government Treasury. So, naturally, by virtue of that, given the nature of how our business operates from a borrowings perspective, we need to make sure that we have enough cash to pay our dividend. In order to do that, essentially, we look at our overall bank balance, and our bank balance will then incorporate our forecasts for our capex spend and our forecast to run our business and then we determine how much we then need to borrow top of that. From our balance sheet perspective, as we borrow, each of those borrowings sits as either current or non-current liabilities within our balance sheet.

**THE CHAIR:** I want to touch on one of the other aspects, Mr Hezkial, that you mentioned. You mentioned that there are drivers around the aging infrastructure but also that there is a heavy focus on growth. Clearly, there is a significant amount of housing going to be needed in the ACT to achieve the various targets that we have got. What sort of impact are we looking at there? Have you already factored in all of the growth in infrastructure and updates to old infrastructure that we need to over the coming period?

**Mr Hezkial:** That is a good question. The short answer is yes. We do factor in growth in terms of the ACT government's latest projections, and not just in terms of population growth but also the other key determinant is population distribution. In particular, when you look at the planning trends or the development trends around the ACT with increased urbanisation, that is also a key consideration of how we may need to work in our infrastructure as well. We do work regularly with the ACT government to understand those requirements ahead of time, and we do develop growth servicing plans, which are available on our website, to try and provide guidance to development as well.

**THE CHAIR:** Yarralumla comes to mind because it is in my electorate. That is an old suburb with aging infrastructure and a significant increase in the number of people who are going to be tapping into that infrastructure in terms of some of the new, higher density developments in the area. How are you looking at that infrastructure? Is there a plan to update that and adjust for those developments at places like the Brickworks and like Forestry House?

**Mr Hezkial:** Typically, we will consider the augmentation to the network when we receive individual developments. So there are two limbs to this. One is the forward asset planning where we look at growth servicing in an area and, to the extent that we can forecast the growth and development in that area, we will make allowances for that in our forward capital program.

The other limb to that is in our assessment of individual developments. Typically, when we receive an application there is a two-stage process. We will provide the developer with some preliminary advice as to what would be required to service that individual

development. We will then await a more detailed submission and then we will check that again to make sure that it meets our design requirements and our hydraulic requirements to be able to service that location. Then, of course, each development attracts its own charges for those developments. So the developer will bear a portion of that cost to upgrade the infrastructure in the area to be able to continue to service that locality.

The other thing I should probably mention is that we also have a renewal program for existing infrastructure. Typically each year, roughly, we look at the sewer network and we would replace or reline an existing sewer pipe network to about three per cent of the total network. We will do condition assessments, we will look at the age of assets and we will have a proactive program of relining and pipe bursting as well as preventative maintenance in terms of clearing lines. So there are a couple of asset management strategies that we use to make sure that the capacity is still there in a locality.

**THE CHAIR:** It would be helpful for me to understand—as an example, sticking with Yarralumla—when you last did a full assessment of the capacity of the infrastructure in that suburb, just as an example of an aging suburb that is going through these changes, and where you are at in terms of planning for upgrading and improving that infrastructure.

**Mr Hezkial:** I would be happy to take on notice any questions on a specific location and come back.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much.

**MS CARRICK:** I have a supplementary on the financing side of stuff. If you have got \$1.8 billion worth of borrowings, how do you pay that off? What is the plan to pay it off? I can see it is growing to \$2.2 billion by the end of the forward estimates.

**Ms Yau:** Thank you for the question. When we are looking at our overall financial sustainability, what we are actively looking at is our capital structure and how that looks in terms of health over time. For example, there are metrics such as the gearing metric, the free cashflows from operations et cetera. There are various metrics which we look at which then help determine financial health. Then, as we have our overall debt, that is looked at over the course of time and, as you say, we would forecast forward.

In this case, we would forward forecast 20 years, look at what borrowings we would need in that time in terms of what is needing to be refinanced in that time—looking at what is additional borrowings in that time to fund the water and sewerage business as well as the ActewAGL Joint Venture business—and we would have a very keen eye to making sure that our overall capital structure is still healthy in terms of our overall metrics. At this point in time, as we look forward, I will give you an example of the gearing. Our regulated gearing percentage is 60 per cent. As we look forward in the SCI period or the forward 26 plus three years, we do stay below the gearing 60 per cent metric, if you like.

If at any point we were needing to have a fresh discussion about our capital structure and our financial sustainability health, there will be various discussions that could be possible. A perfect example is the 100 per cent dividend policy. Actually, that is a key

driver by which we need to have additional borrowings each year. If at any point that our financial health did not actually look as we did in the forward forecast and we needed to have a re-discussion with our shareholders on that, certainly we would go ahead and have fresh discussions on our dividend policy to make sure that we do have health into the future.

**MS CARRICK:** I noticed that, with all of those borrowings, there is a significant amount of interest paid. It is up to nearly \$471 million—nearly half a billion—by the time we get to the out estimates. Interestingly, we are borrowing to pay dividends. Does that seem a bit perverse? That blows my mind. Given that there is a big infrastructure program ahead of you, that is going to be more and more borrowings in interest. I am just curious to know the plan to manage it so it does not escalate like it is in the general government sector.

**Ms Yau:** It is an excellent point. Across the Australian water industry, given that we are not competing against each other, it is a very live discussion. A common theme across the water industry is that we are all facing aging assets, population growth and climate change resilience, as well as then the broader backdrop of customer affordability, customer bills et cetera. That is a challenge we all face. Most water utilities are price regulated, as are we, and most water utilities have a dividend policy very similar to ours. So the challenge that you have posed is exactly the challenge that is faced across the industry. The responsibility we take is to make sure that we are forward forecasting and we are very informed around what our forward health looks like and to be having active discussions as we need to.

**MS CARRICK:** When you say it is 100 per cent, 100 per cent of what?

**Ms Yau:** 100 per cent of our net profit after tax, excluding gifted assets.

**MS CARRICK:** When you say the 60 per cent gearing, what is that 60 per cent—over what?

**Ms Yau:** To put it crudely, it is debt over debtless equity, but there is some nuance there.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay, thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I think it would be useful if you could explain that 100 per cent dividend policy a bit more directly. What is the source of the policy? Is that simply Icon Water's policy? Is that government policy? How does it operate? Could you just explain a bit more and help us understand?

**Ms Yau:** Yes. That is set through from our voting shareholders and therefore through from ACT government, and so that is a set policy. I think the last edit—and I may have this wrong—was around 2016, which is when we carved out the gifted assets or the broader contributed assets. Actually I take that back: there was one more edit since then where we had, again, another carve-out for something which was quite unique in that financial year. So an option for us is that, if there are exceptional circumstances in a financial year, we would seek to have an active discussion with our shareholders to say, “Could we have a carve-out?”

**THE CHAIR:** And to be clear: your shareholder is the ACT government? They are the sole shareholder?

**Ms Yau:** Correct, yes.

**MS CARRICK:** Far out. Who is the responsible minister?

**Ms Yau:** The Minister for Finance, Minister Stephen-Smith.

**THE CHAIR:** What is the opportunity cost of this policy of returning 100 per cent? Surely there are other things, including that forward plan, that could be invested in.

**Ms Yau:** Our overall business is price regulated from the Independent Competition Regulatory Commission. One of their key roles is to make sure that, as Icon Water, we have the funds that we need to run our business and that those funds are prudent and efficient and that they translate into customer prices. That, fundamentally, is the crux of us making sure that we have what we need to run our business, and that includes making sure that we run it in a way that is sustainable for future generations as well as running it in a way that our customer prices are very much affordable in the short and medium term too.

What that means is that the ICRC makes sure that we have a keen eye to making sure that our revenue is what it needs to be and that translates into profits. From that perspective—to, I think, the intent of your question in terms of how we make sure that we have enough funds to run our business—how we make sure that we do is that we very much are managing our business actively in terms of what we need for the future.

**THE CHAIR:** That is not quite where I was going, but I know there are other questions. I just want to get to this last bit. The statement on page 217 mentioned market interest rates for that debt. What does that look like? Is that market interest rates on government bonds? What interest rate are we talking about?

**Ms Yau:** Each of the tranches of debt that we have is in their own right and has their own term, interest rates et cetera. The comment which is very relevant in recent years, with like CPI going up and down et cetera, is where we have index linked bonds. Some of the older debt that we have had—so back in the time when we enlarged the Cotter Dam—in terms of the nature of the debt, were inflationary bonds, if you like.

What that means is that, in each year, the interest that we pay on those tranches of debt are very much exposed to how CPI is moving, whether it is moving up or down. That is what has caused some volatility in our interest payments in the last five or 10 years. Just to give you a sense: at 30 June 2024 about 36 per cent of our debt was linked to CPI. That is why it can move. Whereas, with any debt that we have been incurring in more recent years, intentionally, we no longer have debt instruments that are linked to inflation. They are more fixed, if you like, in nature.

**THE CHAIR:** What instruments are you using there?

**MS CARRICK:** Can we have it on notice—all the instruments, the interest rates and

the amount you have paid back?

**THE CHAIR:** That might be easier.

**Ms Yau:** We can give you that table, yes. We will take that on notice.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**MR RATTENBURY:** I want to ask about both Icon and Evo's role in housing supply. Obviously, there is a desire across the board to improve supply of housing and speed up those processes. First of all, both organisations are referral agencies in the DA process, aren't you?

**Mr Hezkial:** Yes.

**MR RATTENBURY:** What is the period in which you have to provide feedback? What is the timeline?

**Mr Hezkial:** We follow the timeframes that are stipulated in the Planning Act. For significant developments—large sort of subdivision developments—there are two stages. In the first stage, we provide an in-principle advice, and that is really designed to assist developers in identifying any key risks upfront. The timeframe for that is within 20 working days. The second stage, once we receive—and usually down the track—a more detailed submission for that development, that is within 10 working days. All other development applications—so smaller in scale—potentially are within 15 days.

We also have timeframes that we set for ourselves around quotations. Once those developments are approved, Icon Water will affect those connections to the live network, and that usually occurs within 10 business days of payment on an invoice. In terms of our performance against those timeframes, just pre-empting the question.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you. Very perceptive, Mr Hezkial.

**Mr Hezkial:** On development applications, from the data I have in front of me right now, between January and June—and this is based on about 210 applications—against the mandated timeframe of 20 working days, we averaged around a 13-day response time. For building approvals, our average response time—again, the data I have is January to June—we averaged around a six and a half day response timeframe.

Those are the timeframes, but I will say upfront that there are opportunities, I think, to do things better and there are, from time to time, anomalies in terms of specific developments taking longer than that. That is a function of a number of things, predominantly complexity. We are seeing quite a degree of more complex developments coming through as we see an increase in urbanisation. We try to avoid any delays by providing that preliminary advice I mentioned in that stage 1 approval.

There are a couple of key themes when it comes to why delays occur, and it is not necessarily Icon Water taking longer to respond to an application. It is usually as a consequence of a resubmission that is required by Icon Water for a number of factors, whether it be information that is missing, issues around clearances not being adequately



resolved or inadequate response to engineering standards, which we are obligated to enforce as a consequence of our technical regulation in our codes.

I guess the other category, just for completeness, is when we get submissions that are outside the bounds of what I am going to call the usual engineering standards. There is obviously a more detailed analysis required that then gets assessed by our engineering department, because we do not want to eliminate any potential for innovation. That obviously takes time. There is a reason that these things take time when they are a little bit bespoke. You mentioned that Icon Water is a referral entity, but we are also sometimes a proponent. So you have to remember that. So we also have an obligation to make sure that there is longevity in our asset network. We have a responsibility to the community to make sure that these things are not so unique in the sense that they are going to fall apart in the near term. I am not suggesting they will, but we have to assure ourselves and assure the community that that is not going to occur. We are talking about assets with 25- or 50-year lifespans. So we are super sensitive to make sure that we do not inherit on behalf of the community any assets that might pose future operability issues or maintainability issues. So that is the other lens to it.

But, in terms of response, generally we are pretty good. Those bespoke scenarios are usually sticking points. We have done a number of things to try and improve the speed of response. Some of those include that we have provided a lot more information on our websites around the requirements. It is a very methodical, staged process where we provide as much information as we can about what our expectations are and what the minimum requirements are that we need in a submission, so that we are eliminating any of those challenges. Of course, when we receive applications and those things are missing, that is when that resubmission occurs. We have seen a reduction in resubmissions since we have made a bit more information available and made that information a bit clearer.

We have also implemented a system—I think it was in late calendar 2024—for developers, specifically, where we have streamlined the submission process for development applications where they can use an online portal. That also allows them to track—because that has been another frustration that we heard; the ability to track—the actual submission and where it is, where the bouncing ball, is in the approval process.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you. That sounds like some good progress. That was Icon.

**Mr Hezkial:** Yes.

**MR RATTENBURY:** In terms of energy connections, are we able to hear from Evo?

**Mr Hezkial:** We can bring them up, if you like.

**Mr Sachse:** Thank you for your question. I will hand over to Mark, who looks after the customer team, to answer your question.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you.

**Mr Kerr:** Evoenergy make very similar comments to what has just been said by Icon

Water. To give you reference data for where we are at in terms of development approvals and business approvals: last financial year was 6.9 days for us, and it typically ranges between 6.5 and seven days, and that is within the sort of 15-day period that is provided. We have a similar process for how we would work with developers, in the sense that we strongly encourage all developers to come to us early as they develop their projects because that is when we can best help them, and we can get best set up.

Sixty-five business days is the timeframe that applies for preliminary network applications, which is essentially the initial piece of advice that we will give to a developer when they come to us looking to put some large additional loads onto the network. And then, once they have done that process, we give them that advice and then it is for the developer to determine whether they wish to proceed. If they do, they will then come to us with a connection application, which is where we do the detailed design and subsequently make a connection offer to the customer.

We are doing a lot of improvement work over the last couple of years. At this point in time, essentially, any project we have that does not meet those timeframes, it really is because the customer is working through their own processes. They often do not necessarily want to go straight from one stage into the other. They may want to go straight from one stage into the other, but that is driven by their timeframes. Or sometimes they are evolving their own application about what they want it to be and things like that, so sometimes they choose to iterate it and make some changes—so that then comes back and we will have some more work.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Just for clarity on the 65 business day metric, can you tell me what that was for, sorry? Is that for the actual service?

**Mr Kerr:** What it is for is called a preliminary network application. So, when a customer initially comes to us, if they are looking for only small amounts of additional load they will skip that initial process. However, if they are looking for large amounts of additional load—because it may be, say, an apartment block or a large commercial building or things like that—they provide an initial application to us for that preliminary network advice. Then we basically do a planning study to give them a range of options about where that additional capacity could be provided to them—because typically there will be multiple technical solutions for how it could work.

Then from that initial study, there is then a preferred or recommended approach, and we give them the advice that they need so that they are aware of that. That is the ideal document because if that is included in the formal development application, they effectively say, “We have worked with Evoenergy; here is what is required.” We receive that through the development application process and we go, “Fantastic, you have already got everything that you need because you have got the preliminary network advice.” And we would then approve it, subject to them meeting the requirements of the preliminary network advice. That is 65 business days from when they submit and we accept their application, till we return that advice to them.

**MR RATTENBURY:** And just to clarify, that is the target. How is the performance going against the target?

**Mr Kerr:** Very good. As I say, we have put a lot of effort. If you had asked me that

question two years ago, it would not have been as good a story. But where we sit right now, when we are not meeting 65 business days it is essentially because the customer is choosing to consider things, or because we are waiting on additional information for them on how to proceed.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you. And just one last comment. I am not sure who wants to take it, but we have seen commentary from the new head of what is now the City and Environment Directorate that they are looking for improvements and speeding up processes. Are you involved in conversations with Mr Peffer around those matters?

**Mr Hezkial:** Not me personally, but our organisations are absolutely engaged at officer level already—and had been, prior to those comments. I think there absolutely is opportunity to streamline referral entity advice so that we are not bouncing applicants between the two respective organisations. That is in progress. We also have, for Icon Water at least, in our new business strategy moving forward a specific initiative focused on streamlining the developer approval process, or the developer journey.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you, and Mr Kerr, just back on my previous question, do you have an actual numerical performance target?

**Mr Kerr:** Absolutely. It depends on the scale of the connection or the type of connection that the customers are looking for. We have talked about the larger connections where it is the 65 business days is the target that we absolutely go for. For smaller connections—

**THE CHAIR:** No, I mean in the actual performance; the delivery. If the target is 65 days, what is the average?

**Mr Kerr:** Yes, so where the customer is not causing delay, it is less than 65. I can guarantee you that. I look at it regularly. For smaller connections, it is a much shorter period of time. So basically we look to do it within 10 business days for a typical residential connection, where a customer comes to us. We will look to turn their application into an offer to them within 10 business days, and we achieve that 99 per cent of the time. It is a very small per cent that typically relates to things outside of our control. The customer sometimes is a factor. Sometimes it is things like weather, because we have to go into people's backyards to do the assessment of what is required.

**MS CARRICK:** Just a supp: If you do that all before the DA goes in, presumably Evoenergy is not holding up DAs because you have got it sorted beforehand. So with Icon Water, is it possible to do the same thing where things are sorted out before the DA goes in?

**Mr Hezkial:** Yes. Sorry if I was not clear. We do have that same process. For major developments there is a two-stage process. The first stage is where we will provide preliminary advice based on how progressed a developer is, in terms of their detailed design. The intent of that is exactly as you described: trying to mine-sweep anything that might come up. Then we will await the final, to rubber stamp. And, as Mark mentioned, if those two things align, then it is typically a smooth process.

What we have experienced on some select developments is that there is quite a lot of

change that occurs in terms of the developer's detailed design and what they would like to do, between the preliminary advice and the detailed design approval. Sometimes that requires further investigation. That does serve to frustrate developers, but in effect, for those obligations that we have, we have to treat any new information on its merits and assess it just as we did the initial. So, quite often that is a source of frustration and tension. If things have changed, then we require them to reassess again.

**MS CARRICK:** I just want to ask about outages. So there have been a number of them and we have received some emails, so can you explain what is causing the outages?

**Mr Sachse:** I might just ask Tomas to come up and introduce himself.

**Mr Keraitis:** Good afternoon, I understand and comply with the privilege requirements. So, there are two categories of outage: planned and unplanned.

Planned outages relate to where we are doing maintenance or project work on the network and we notify the customers ahead of time that there will be an outage so that we can perform that work safely.

Unplanned outages are caused by a range of factors. There is a combination of different causes that have happened recently. They include vegetation encroachment on our lines and assets, wildlife impacts, asset failures, no assets, third party causes, or, in some cases, unknowns where we cannot find the root cause. Our network overall is experiencing record demand at the moment, driven predominantly by electrification and the demand growth that goes with that; weather factors—it has been a colder winter than usual; and, to a lesser extent, urban infill and population growth. As demand on our network increases, assets become more stressed and some of the weak points on the network get exposed—particularly where there are older assets or assets that are nearing capacity limitations.

**MS CARRICK:** Is there a process of being able to identify those weaker points on the network and have them in the maintenance program, or when you upgrade the program?

**Mr Keraitis:** Yes. We have three main programs. First is our augmentation program where we forecast future demand; look at the capacity of our network; and confirm that we have sufficient capacity to meet that demand. We have a very large program of augmentation works to cope with the factors I have described. That is being rolled out at the moment and will be into the future—over this regulatory period and into the next, and probably into the next. So that is our augmentation program.

Then we have our replacement expenditure program. This is planned replacement expenditure where we look at asset condition, asset age, and any deteriorating assets, then plan replacements or upgrades accordingly.

And then we have our planned maintenance program which involves routine maintenance around the network for identification of assets that need repairs or upgrades, or readiness for stressful seasons such as summer with storms or winter where there are high peaks. Those are probably the three main ones that we have as part of our asset management processes.

**MS CARRICK:** So, with the augmentation and the replacement and the maintenance, how is all that paid for? Is that paid for from fees or charges, or do you have to use borrowings as well?

**Mr Sachse:** I will take that question. Thank you for the question. Much like Icon Water, Evoenergy is a regulated entity. The Australian Energy Regulator sets prices for Evoenergy. So, every five years they will do a review and make a decision based on those future requirements that Tomas just outlined—in terms of the capital expenditure, operations and maintenance. Prices are set to recover that investment and our operating cost over that five-year period. In terms of debt, at the moment, Evoenergy is part of the ActewAGL distribution partnership, and that distribution partnership has zero debt in that entity at this stage. Ms Yau did talk about debt more broadly through Icon Water and it is something that the ActewAGL distribution owners are considering, as to whether debt needs to be raised to fund some of that additional capital expenditure to allow electrification to occur over the long term.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay, thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** We might go to Mr Rattenbury for a supplementary.

**MR RATTENBURY:** I am just intrigued how wildlife leads to an outage. What can we imagine would be those scenarios?

**Mr Keraitis:** There was an incident on the weekend where a bird's nest came into Transgrid's bulk supply substation, on live assets, and that caused an outage. Other typical causes are possums bridging across two phases on the network; bats, likewise; and sometimes snakes find their way into substations and short-out across high voltage bushings. So those are a couple of examples.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you. Back on Ms Carrick's main question about outages: there are performance requirements for the network that are set; national performance standards? Are we right about that?

**Mr Keraitis:** We have a planning standard that we adhere to, with minimum restoration timeframes. There are security-of-supply related requirements in the National Electricity Rules. The UTR technical regulator has codes as well. So yes, there is a range of different levels of service standard that we are held to. I think when it comes to outages, probably the most critical one is around duration of time unsupplied, and the maximum periods within which we need to have supply restored. If those are looking like being breached in certain circumstances, we have the option of generation to deploy on customers to restore supply.

**MR RATTENBURY:** And are you currently meeting those performance standards? We have heard some feedback from constituents—probably a bit on radio and a bit of anecdotal—that they have a sense of perhaps more outages than they are used to.

**Mr Sachse:** I might answer that question, thank you. We do acknowledge that the outages are not good for our customers, especially in the middle of the winter. But if you look more broadly, and if you look at the benchmarking across the industry, Evoenergy's network is one of the most reliable networks in Australia. Traditionally,

over a long period of time, we have been in the top two reliable electrical networks across Australia, which is a reflection of our investment into that network.

**MR RATTENBURY:** And is that standard being maintained? That has long been the reputation. Is that still the case?

**Mr Sachse:** Yes. The AR do release benchmarking reports across the industry on an annual basis. The most recent report that the AR released—the 2024 report that was released in November 2024—did indicate again that Evoenergy is in that top one or two distribution businesses across Australia.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. I am very conscious that we are coming up against time and there are still quite a few people looking to ask questions. Maybe you will need to take this on notice. Regarding the discussion around financing arrangements, I am interested in the statement that debt will be introduced into the ActewAGL distribution partnership during the SCI time horizon. I am hoping someone could explain what that means and constitutes.

**Ms Yau:** I am happy to take that one, thank you. Like Mr Sachse referenced, zero debt is currently contained within the ActewAGL distribution partnership. And so, as I referenced earlier, all of that debt essentially is funded from its respective owners. In this case: Icon Water owns 50 per cent of Evoenergy; Jemena owns the other 50 per cent. So the owners essentially are funding Evoenergy.

An active discussion at the moment—as you have seen in our statement of corporate intent—is that we have an assumption in there that debt will be introduced into the ActewAGL distribution partnership during the SCI horizon, in that one-plus-three year. And the introduction and timing of that remains uncertain at the moment. In the absence of that, naturally the prevailing funding mechanisms apply. In terms of us exploring that, one of the key reasons is it makes good sense that debt belongs in the place where it is incurred. In that sense, from a distribution business which has heavy balance sheet assets et cetera, it would make good sense that it actually is geared healthily in its own right. Naturally, debt is cheaper than equity—so there are many reasons why we are pursuing it.

We are actively working with ACT government Treasury regarding our draft proposal in that space. Naturally, there is a significant body of work to get that across the line and approved. The ACT Government Solicitor's office has been part of these discussions in the past. It would be fair to say that in our corporate history we have attempted multiple times to introduce debt into the ActewAGL distribution partnership and have never quite managed that, for various reasons. Given the prevailing environment and the need to achieve net zero by 2045, I think the imperative is there more than ever before. To fund electrification, a significant amount of capital expenditure investment is needed in this forward 20 years, as well as the fact that in the water and sewerage business we have our own capital expenditure profile as well.

So, talking back to Ms Carrick's point around our financial sustainability and health, as we look across the coming 20 years it is more than likely that introducing debt into the

ActewAGL distribution partnership is a suitable outcome for the health of both entities—and actually just simply makes more sense. So that is an active discussion.

**THE CHAIR:** Clearly, there is an extra step in visibility. Will that still be visible in the ACT budget?

**Ms Yau:** Would it be borrowed through the ACT Treasury? Is that the question?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes. Would we still have visibility all the way through to debt held by ActewAGL?

**Ms Yau:** The current thinking—and I note this is a draft—is that ActewAGL would borrow in its own right through the market rather than through ACT government Treasury. However, naturally, the ACT government, via its shareholders and Icon Water, would want to have transparency in reporting around what the debt levels are, how it is performing et cetera. The intent at this point is that there will be transparency and the ActewAGL distribution partnership would borrow straight through the market.

**MS CARRICK:** Why is that cheaper than equity? The ACT government is putting capital injections into new entities, so why is that more expensive than having debt which has interest payments?

**Ms Yau:** Often it is looked at from an opportunity cost perspective.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you.

**MS TOUGH:** In the budget, one of the priorities is “Our people are at their best”. I understand that Icon achieved platinum-level recognition in the ACT government’s Healthier Work Program in 2024. How was that achieved, and what else are you doing in “Our people are at their best”?

**Mr Hezkial:** Firstly, thank you for pointing that out. It is something we are quite proud of. It has been an evolution over many years and is a quite heavy focus of our people, health and safety strategy. There are a number of limbs to it, but we focus quite heavily on wellbeing within the workplace. Icon Water is currently going through quite a lot of organisational change, so there was recognition that we needed to make sure that we had the right programs in place and were empowering our people. The other limbs are around capability building, skills building, looking at things like diversity and inclusion, and looking at our leadership framework. We have been rolling out a number of initiatives in the business to try to respond to what we think we need now but also what the business needs into the future.

We have also drawn quite heavily on a lot of feedback that we received in our business about the things that we were doing well and the things that we were not necessarily doing well. We have tried to respond to those things in terms of developing and rolling out some of these programs. Quite often, at Icon Water you will see a head-mast program, but a lot of the groups or divisions within the business will have their own specific local response plans to what we hear staff telling us. I do not think there is one silver bullet; it is an aggregation of a number of things over time. We are really proud of our recognition.

**MS TOUGH:** And that is something you will keep working towards every year?

**Mr Hezkial:** Of course. It is a bit like painting the Harbour Bridge. I do not want to sit in front of you and say that we have hit the nail on the head, but I think we are moving in the right direction. One of the initiatives that underpins our ability to do these sorts of programs is recently building our own HR capability within the business and transitioning some services cross from ActewAGL. It is one of the direct outputs of that corporate services transition that we have been able to do some of that stuff.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I am keen to chat about the Belconnen trunk sewer augmentation and revegetation project. I understand that you worked with the Ginninderra Catchment Group on a native grassland revegetation project for the Belconnen Trunk Sewer Augmentation Project. I have been told that, while the works have been completed, the restoration has not necessarily been successful, with issues like inadequate weed control and maintenance vehicles damaging newly sewn areas. What sorts of remediation works will now happen, and what state will the land be in when it is handed over?

**Mr Hezkial:** For context, the Belconnen trunk sewer main project was quite a large infrastructure project around servicing growth in the northern parts of Canberra. The construction of the pipeline was about 2½ kilometres long, so it is quite a corridor. We did a lot of community engagement. It has been really successful. I think we have improved the amenity in that space. Typically with these construction projects, there are maintenance arrangements post construction. In essence, the constructor will have a liability period beyond practical completion of the works to do some of that maintenance. I am not across the current status of those contract terms, but, if there are any specific local spots that we need to respond to, I would be happy to take those details and chat to the team. That is typically how they would work. We would expect that maintenance upkeep until the vegetation has taken in the space.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I am particularly interested in the areas where you have been working with the Ginninderra Catchment Group. Will you continue to engage local expertise, such as from the Ginninderra Catchment Group, to bring the project to completion?

**Mr Hezkial:** I would like to think the answer to that question is yes, but I am probably not close enough to the specifics of the project. I would be happy to confer with the team about whether there are any specific issues. Normally, we would continue those engagements, so I would be surprised if the answer were no. I just do not want to give you an answer that is not entirely accurate.

**MR EMERSON:** I have a question about electricity poles. It comes back to electricity pole upgrades and a question from Ms Carrick earlier. What is the rate of replacement of our old poles? The answer does not necessarily have to be exact.

**Mr Juhasz:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Thank you for your question on the rate of pole replacements. On average, we replace about 300 aging power poles annually, and a smaller percentage of power poles are replaced through



customer service upgrades and augmentation of the network as well. It would be about 300 on average.

**MR EMERSON:** Roughly, how many aged or aging poles need replacement?

**Mr Juhasz:** We generally have a rate around 300 per annum as well. We run a condition based replacement program to prudentially spend customer money to fund those pole replacements.

**MR EMERSON:** My understanding of one of the barriers to upgrading our NBN system is that some of the old poles cannot bear the weight of the upgrades. I am interested in the intersection between upgrading poles and rolling out NBN here, and also the interactions that have happened in terms of negotiations with NBN Co. I understand the federal government announced more funding earlier this year. I am interested in that whole intersection and where we are up to.

**Mr Juhasz:** We are in discussion with the National Broadband Network at the moment. The scope is to look at about 800 additional poles that will potentially be replaced over a four-year period. As I said, we are in discussion with the NBN around firming that up.

**MR EMERSON:** So it will not go underground? That was one of the options. Do we just replace all the poles and use the existing infrastructure?

**Mr Juhasz:** All I can talk to is what Evoenergy's scope is. The NBN discussions look at the above-ground options for those areas. They have discussed that with us. It would hang off existing poles or we would replace poles as required.

**MR EMERSON:** Is the proposition that they would fund those upgrades or it would be co-funded?

**Mr Juhasz:** We are still in discussions, but the intent is that it would be funded through the NBN.

**MR EMERSON:** Great. Similarly on upgrading infrastructure—it touches on a question about subsection limits—you may have an existing apartment complex that is at capacity and needs to be upgraded for EV charging purposes in particular. How often has that come up as a barrier, where people reach out and discover that they cannot afford to upgrade?

**Mr Juhasz:** It very much depends on the individual circumstances of the apartment block or whatever the particular arrangement is. It is still relatively early, as those sorts of buildings are still working out how they want to electrify. Some buildings may have technical challenges, in terms of how they may replace gas for cooking or hot water—all those sorts of things.

Specifically to your question around EV charging, it very much gets down to the capacity that was asked for when the building was built. Evoenergy is effectively obligated to give you the lowest cost technically acceptable solution for what you asked for at the time. Some developers are more forward thinking and ask for some additional

capacity so that they have that available to them as they may choose to go about doing those sorts of expansions or introduce new technologies such as EV chargers. Older buildings are less likely to have necessarily considered that. Under those scenarios, customers would come to us and would say, “We have this in place now. We want to expand it by 20 per cent” or whatever it is. They put in an application to us. It is then up to Evoenergy, within the 65 business days that we talked about before, to work out how that would occur. We can answer it from a network point of view. What we cannot do is answer how the customer might work out how they would change it within their building and those sorts of things. That is certainly how it works from a network point of view.

**MR EMERSON:** Is the cost of that upgrade borne by the customer in that situation?

**Mr Juhasz:** Regarding the way that new customer connections or upgraded customer connections work, there are a whole lot of rules. We try to distil that down in a document called the connection policy, which is available for all customers to read. Fundamentally, part of the tariff that customers pay is considered to be there for the purposes of augmenting and developing the network. If a customer asks for additional capacity, we will look at the forward incremental revenue over time. For residential customers, that is typically 30 years in an apartment block or residential block. We say, “What is the additional incremental revenue that Evoenergy would get over those forward 30 years?” If that incremental revenue actually covers the cost for Evoenergy to provide that additional capacity, no payment is required. There is a very small circa \$5,000 design fee at the very beginning, but no other costs have to be paid.

If the additional incremental revenue does not cover all of the additional costs, essentially the customer who gets the benefit in the apartment block would pay the difference, but they only pay the difference that is not covered by the incremental revenue associated with the new connection.

**MR EMERSON:** Where is that policy on the lowest cost for what you need at the time? You can imagine that, if we are electrifying everything, we might want to start planning forward. Obviously, I understand that we would not want to charge customers more than we need to. I am wondering about the basis for that policy.

**Mr Juhasz:** The lowest cost technically acceptable solution requirement exists effectively in the national electricity rules and laws. Customers can always ask for more. It is just treated differently financially. You can definitely say, “I want this.” Let’s say it is one MBA, for want of a hypothetical number, but then the customer can say, “I want an extra half MBA for future things such as EV charging et cetera.” We would definitely provide them with an offer that meets what they want. It is treated a bit differently economically. The things we talked about, like forward incremental revenues, apply to the LCTAS, the lowest cost technically acceptable solution, if you want that extra bit. That is typically required of a customer to pay.

**MR EMERSON:** Understood.

**MS CARRICK:** This is about the trunk infrastructure for both water and energy. What conversations do you have with the ACT government to know how much capacity you need when you might have a town centre that has 35 towers already? How do you know

whether there will be 60 or 100, when the population forecasts are old and dodgy? Tuggeranong is going backwards. The current population forecast for Tuggeranong is going backwards. What conversations do you have in order to know the capacity of the trunk infrastructure you need to put into a certain area?

**Mr Hezkial:** From Icon Water's perspective, we rely quite heavily on regular engagement with the ACT government on any forecasts they might have, whether it is for population or development. We also have our own growth servicing plans that are based on that advice, but we routinely revise our asset management strategies as well. We have asset management strategies by what we call asset class, so, if there is any new information, we have the ability to modify what we might need to do. Sometimes the improvements to trunk infrastructure are not necessarily quarantined to growth. Sometimes they are functional upgrades to maintain serviceability. So there are different categories of investment. But we would routinely upgrade our forecasts and projections. It is based on best available and latest advice.

**MS CARRICK:** As long as it is not just piecemeal, one development at a time.

**Mr Hezkial:** Not at all.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** We will wrap up things there. 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*.

**Hearing suspended from 12.36 pm to 4.01 pm.**

Appearances:

Stephen-Smith, Ms Rachel, Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

Leigh, Ms Kathy, Head of Service, Director-General

Wright, Mr Robert, Acting Deputy Director-General, Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy

Young, Mr Michael, Executive Group Manager, Work Safety Group, Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy

George, Ms Natalee, Executive Branch Manager, Cultural Transformation Branch, Capability, Culture and Governance Group, Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy

**THE CHAIR:** We welcome Ms Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA in her capacity as the Minister for the Public Service. Thank you for assisting the committee at short notice. We also welcome the officials in attendance and the Head of Service.

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 to questions. I want to start with forecasts of public service numbers. I think that appendix K of budget statement B sets out public service numbers for the current year, but not future years—full out years. Do you have forecast numbers for out years, and can they be provided?

**Ms Leigh:** I would have to take that question on notice. I am actually not certain. These are the numbers that Treasury pulled together for budget purposes. These are the only numbers I have seen. I am not aware of any others, but I cannot be certain that they do not exist.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** To be clear about the process, this is information that is pulled together by Treasury out of their work with CFO, so it really is a question for Treasury.

**THE CHAIR:** Aside from the budget single year numbers, do you have forecasts for public service numbers looking into forward years?

**Ms Leigh:** I do not believe so.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Treasury would hold some of that information, but I do not think we have any.

**THE CHAIR:** Moving to a slightly different angle on this, part of what I am trying to understand is the movement of numbers across a period of time. Certainly, one of the big concerns that we are hearing is still the prospect of redundancies and the cutting of public service numbers—whether that is made up of movement from one area into another or whatever that that looks like exactly. I started to ask the question the other day, but I did not get a great answer. Have there been any recent spill and fill exercises

across the service?

**Ms Leigh:** Unlike the commonwealth, we do not have that terminology. What I can say is that as part of the MOG, the Director-General and Deputy Director-General positions in the departments that were abolished have also been abolished.

**THE CHAIR:** Outside of the MOG, are there any processes that look at a group of public servants in a particular area to reduce the numbers of a function?

**Ms Leigh:** You said, “To reduce their numbers.” I would not answer it in that way. But, of course, we have just established two directorates that have, in each case, been formed by bringing together all the staff from two other directorates. It is now the responsibility of the DG to look at the priorities they have for how that directorate should be structured to get the best use out of public resources.

So they will be looking at the structure of those directorates, and the purpose will be to make sure that it is organised in the best way to get the best use of those resources, given the government’s priorities. The Chief Minister has already said that there will be no redundancies below SES, so it will be done accordingly.

**THE CHAIR:** That comment, if I recall correctly, was arising from the machinery-of-government changes.

**Ms Leigh:** Yes, and that was what my comment related to as well.

**THE CHAIR:** In the past 12 months—I am happy for you to take this on notice—how much has been spent on redundancies across the service? Actually, it would be good to know now. Is there any provision for the payment of redundancies over the next 12 months?

**Ms Leigh:** I will take that on notice, thank you. There has been no whole-of-service organised process for redundancies, so I am not aware of anything, but to be sure that I am being accurate, I will take it on notice.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Mr Wright, do you have any—

**Mr Wright:** I can talk about the fact that in the last 12 months the head count went up by 3.5 per cent.

**THE CHAIR:** What I am trying to do is see this at a slightly lower level. The head count does not, as you would appreciate, tell the whole story.

Ms Leigh, the other aspect of the question I was asking is about the process. I mentioned spill and fill, and you said you do not use that terminology. Is there a process by which you work through who ends up in what position as a result of this machinery-of-government change? Are people going to end up applying again for the jobs that they have been doing? Is there any reclassification involved in that?

**Ms Leigh:** In terms of jobs being reclassified, I think it is probably better simply to say that if current profiles are not the best adapted for the new priorities you would establish

new roles with the correct job description, etcetera. But in terms of what the process is in the ACT, there is a different set of consequences for the SES compared to the non-SES. So—

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, I understand that. We had a discussion around that.

**Ms Leigh:** Okay.

**THE CHAIR:** In terms of that process, I am not necessarily interested in what it looks like for the SES; I am more interested in everyone else.

**Ms Leigh:** In terms of everyone else, I might let Mr Wright talk in more detail about the non-SES.

**Mr Wright:** I think I covered some of this in our Friday hearing, Mr Cocks. In the ACT public service, we do not do forced redundancies. Director-Generals manage their workforce and have obligations under the Financial Management Act to work within their budget.

I am unaware of any plans for redundancies within those agencies, but they will need to work to manage their budgets effectively. This has always been true; this is not a new thing. But if you look over the last 12 months, our FTE numbers have a 3.7 per cent increase, our recruitment—

**THE CHAIR:** It sounds like we are back to those—

**Mr Wright:** Sorry, Mr Cocks?

**THE CHAIR:** What I was asking about was the process that people will have to go through as a result of this, rather than those high-level numbers. I think we probably—

**Mr Wright:** When there are redundancies, we have a process whereby there are requirements regarding consultation with both staff and their union representatives. We take those consultation requirements very seriously. We also are very focused on opportunities for staff to work in a more mobile manner, which is part of what I talked to you about on Friday as well.

We are looking at opportunities—particularly strongly in the next 12 months—to see how we can more effectively mobilise our staff through the service, rather than look at things like redundancies. We want our staff to have strong career pathways.

When we have things like new budget cases that come through and are delivered, we are really keen for those staff to be in a position where it is appropriate for them to move to the next government priority and be able to work on that.

We are more focused on mobilising our workforce. We have that focus on mobility. In terms of redundancy, that is prescribed in the enterprise agreement, and that talks about consultation.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay, that is helpful. In table 3.4.2 in the budget outlook, there is a spike

in the growth of employee expenses of \$126 million this financial year, followed by a reduction of \$28 million in employee expenses the year after. Can you tell me what is driving that change?

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Sorry, Mr Cocks, do you have a page number reference for that?

**THE CHAIR:** Table 3.4.2 of the budget outlook.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Sorry, I picked up the wrong one.

**THE CHAIR:** It is the one with the colours.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** But at least I brought both this time! Sorry, page?

**THE CHAIR:** Table 3.4.2. I do not have the page number in front of me.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Hang on, got it, yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Again, we copy and paste these things.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Sorry, what was your question again, Mr Cocks?

**THE CHAIR:** There is a spike in the growth of employee expenses of about \$126 million this financial year followed by a reduction of \$28 million in employee expenses the following year. What are the drivers of the growth and why does it drop the following year?

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** We will take the detail of the question on notice, Mr Cocks, because it is clearly related to the whole of the budget and the way that everything has flowed through. But I think this really is about some of the decisions we have made as a government and that, as Mr Wright alluded to earlier, everyone is going to have to live within their budget. We have made a really significant increase, as outlined in the table, in this financial year—from 2024-25 to 2025-26. There are probably two things going on. There will probably be some small number of ceasing initiatives between this financial year and next financial year that would be determined through next year's budget that might have some FTE associated with them, but for which funding is not currently included in the budget, and then everyone is being asked to live within their means, including Canberra Health Services, over this next four years. Probably both of those things are coming together. But as you will see, there is then forecast growth beyond 2026-27, so I suspect it is just a factor of trying to get back to a little bit of a more manageable overall budget.

We will take the detail of the question on notice. It is probably best for Treasury to provide some advice.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Rattenbury?

**MR RATTENBURY:** I want to ask about the extent to which you think Digital Canberra will change the way the ACT public service works. Obviously, there have been a number of problematic IT projects, and Auditor-General reports flowing from

that. I am interested in how you see this will change some of those outcomes and what your expectations of the setup are.

**Ms Leigh:** In a way, it is a continuation of changes that have been taking place iteratively. We are a very small public service. It makes far more sense to concentrate our expertise in ICT in one area where we can grow that capability. People can learn from each other. There can be a career path. Therefore, we will attract better people. It makes a lot of sense in terms of strengthening our ICT capability.

It is exactly the same model that was followed in creating Major Projects Canberra, which is now Infrastructure Canberra. The Digital Canberra Directorate, in carrying out those projects, will report to the subject area minister. For example, in relation to a health project, they will report to the health minister and so on, which, again, is the same model that we have for Infrastructure Canberra.

This has got the benefit that you get the expertise of the concentration of ICT experts, but you still have the accountability to the minister, who is accountable to the community for delivering that particular outcome. The directorate that supports the minister on that outcome will also have a key role as the business-outcome owner that will be able to define what the objective of the particular project is so that we are quite sure that we are aligning the ICT effort with the substantive outcome that is sought to be achieved. That is why we think that it will make a significant difference in strengthening our capability in that area.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Does this practically mean that agencies will no longer, essentially, be the ones who procure IT projects? Digital Canberra will take the project over in partnership with development policy officers from an agency that—

**Ms Leigh:** As a general proposition. We are doing this iteratively, so as we step through it, any refinements in the model will be decided by ministers, but that is certainly the general intention.

**MR RATTENBURY:** You made a reference to Infrastructure Canberra. Have you seen this model in any other jurisdictions and learnt lessons from those other places?

**Ms Leigh:** No, not that I am aware of. We have drawn on, very much, our Infrastructure Canberra model. We are a very small jurisdiction, so what is going to be most effective for us can be different from a large jurisdiction, where they have the capacity to duplicate skills. It is entirely plausible that it would be a great solution for us and not so significant for another jurisdiction.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Is there a particular brief for Digital Canberra in coming to the role? Where I am trying to go with that is that obviously you have described them taking on that role to improve our ICT procurement and project development, but do they also have a brief around, essentially, making the ACT more digitally capable? For example, there is a series of services that New South Wales has that we do not at the moment that I think members of the community are looking for. Is that part of the objective?

**Ms Leigh:** It will also, of course, assist with that, yes.



**MR RATTENBURY:** Are there particular projects that you have in mind that the ACT should be taking on?

**Ms Leigh:** These are all matters that have to be worked through with the budget process and choices have to be made, so there is nothing that I can specifically name.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Mr Rattenbury, I do not know if you are talking about things like digital licences and that kind of—

**MR RATTENBURY:** That was an example I had in mind.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Yes.

**MR RATTENBURY:** There will be others. Various people have various views, yes.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** In relation to that matter, and related issues of digital identification, there is a big piece of work being undertaken nationally through digital and data ministers, and supporting officials, in relation to nationally consistent digital identity processes.

The small number of jurisdictions that currently have systems in place are not compatible systems. They do not use the same type of digital identification. With New South Wales, while they have an electronic licence, or a digital licence, it is not something that is necessarily recognised by other police forces around the country as being a legitimate form of identification, for example. So we are wanting to ensure that, when we go down that path, we are doing it in a way that is going to be consistent and nationally recognised.

**MR RATTENBURY:** It was not meant to pick on specific things—

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** I just thought it would be helpful for you, if that was the kind of thing you had in mind. It is a question that gets asked a lot, but it is not something we are rushing into. We are really working in the context of national work on some of those community facing things, where we want to both build on the experience of other jurisdictions and be as nationally consistent as we can, and know that, when we do roll something out, we are not going to have to redo it.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Carrick?

**MS CARRICK:** I noticed this morning in the paper that CommBank has reduced its staff numbers by 90 because of AI—reduced the frontline services. What impact do you think it will have in the coming years on the ACT public service?

**Ms Leigh:** I think that is very hard to speculate about at this very early stage. Certainly, at this stage, if you are talking about staff reductions, none at all. It is very hard to speculate into the longer term.

**MS CARRICK:** I think it is coming quickly. I have a question on payroll capability. The delivery of payroll capability and human resource management is being upgraded at the moment by Digital Canberra. There was the previous \$78 million attempt. It is

pretty important to get it right this time. What risk assessment do you have in place for this project?

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Mr Wright is the outcome owner for PCHRM and can talk to this. When we had Digital Canberra in the room last week, Eamonn spoke a bit about where that project is up to. It did not get as many questions as I expected. I can assure you, Ms Carrick, that there is significant risk management associated with PCHRM.

**Mr Wright:** Ms Carrick, would you mind repeating the question?

**MS CARRICK:** This is a critical project for the human resource management system and payroll capability that is being delivered. Given that it builds on the previous module—the other modules did not—I would think it has significant risk around it.

**Mr Wright:** Ms Carrick, we are rolling out our payroll capability human resource management program. It is a four-year program. It is designed to modernise and improve the payroll capability in the HR systems to drive good governance. A lot of work has been done in terms of ensuring that we have the right support in relation to that and that we have independent review of the governance arrangements. We have had some initial success in the program, particularly with regard to moving staff from Kronos, which is a time and attendance system, onto UKG Pro, which is the online, in-the-cloud version of the time and attendance system. That has been very successfully rolled out in the business areas in which we have done that. We have some good successes coming. There is still a lot of work to do, but the program is in a good position at this particular juncture.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** I will go to one of the issues of risk. One of the decisions that was made in re-establishing this program was to build on the existing capabilities that are used across ACT government for payroll—the CHRIS21 and HR21, the Frontier products. Without going back too much into the history, at the time that the HRIMS project was developed, it was not considered that upgrades to CHRIS21 and HR21 would be an appropriate solution. Having revisited that in light of the challenges with the HRIMS project, that is the approach that is being taken. It is a significantly less risky proposition from the start to essentially upgrade products that we already use to the most up-to-date products.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you.

**MS CASTLEY:** The federal IR minister is talking about a union veto over the use of AI by public services. Is this something that you support?

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** We certainly have been engaging in conversation with the unions about the use of AI, including the establishment of the AI framework that Digital Canberra has been overseeing. That is more about how business areas, when they are coming forward with a proposition to implement AI, understand the risks and the benefits associated with that, and to make sure that everything is taken into account, particularly cyber security, which is managed by a separate area. There is also human centred design—making sure that the final decision on something that could potentially detrimentally impact an ACT citizen or consumer is taken by a human being, not automated through AI. But AI is able to be used and implemented to support people to

do their jobs more efficiently.

Going back to Mr Wright's earlier comment in relation to consultation, our enterprise agreements require consultation with our union partners for any significant business change. That is always going to be part of the conversation. That consultation does not amount to a veto, but we certainly take the feedback from our union partners very seriously. We are considering the use of AI in the context of helping people do their jobs better, more efficiently and with less manual processing, rather than replacing human jobs with AI.

**Mr Wright:** Ms Castley, in relation to that, there is an Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy rep on that particular working group to ensure that employee elements are taken into consideration when considering artificial intelligence.

**THE CHAIR:** I think it is always useful to understand that, when we talk about AI at the moment, we are talking about large language models and algorithms. Does the ACT government currently have a protocol for any entry of private information—information about individuals—in AI systems?

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** How those privacy things are managed is one of the things that is captured in the framework. For example, in the context of one of my other portfolios, a lot of AI tools are used by clinicians, general practitioners and other medical officers to help them take notes more efficiently. AI will listen to the conversation, pull out the important things and will effectively write a draft set of notes for that consultation. Were we to implement those kinds of tools in the ACT public system, we would need to be very much assured. All health practitioners in the ACT need to abide by the Health Records (Privacy and Access) Act, but we would certainly want to be assured that the information is not going offshore anywhere and that it is secure information. There is that sort of process to follow. There are also processes regarding where that information could potentially be shared if a clinician is using that tool. I am not articulating that very well.

**THE CHAIR:** I think I understand. It sounds like the framework will set out the rules for engaging with AI on private information. Is that in place now?

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** The framework is in place. It sets out the way that individual business areas would need to work through the identified issues if they were considering using AI as part of their business processes. It is a framework for business areas themselves to use to assure themselves that they have considered all of the risks as well as the benefits, but there is also support from Digital Canberra in working through that. As Mr Wright said, there is an overarching governance process for that.

**THE CHAIR:** It sounds like there is a fair degree of comfort in using AI to handle private information and algorithmically-driven programs.

**Mr Wright:** The AI framework that we are talking about is complementary to other IT governance, which is extensive—for loading information to an external service et cetera. It does not sit in isolation of that.

**THE CHAIR:** Is the framework something that we are able to access?

**Mr Wright:** I can take that on notice, Mr Cocks.

**THE CHAIR:** That would be wonderful.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** I am not sure whether it is public.

**THE CHAIR:** It might be helpful in understanding how you approach these things.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** We may need to redact bits in terms of IT security. It seems unlikely. It is a broad framework. We will take it on notice.

**Mr Wright:** I want to get back to Ms Carrick's question quickly, if that is okay. Ms Carrick, you were asking about governance. In addition to the pieces that I talked about, there was a risk management working group, where risks were assessed and reported with regard to the program. There is also reporting to the audit committee and independence assurance. It follows the ACTIA risk framework.

**MS CARRICK:** That is good. Lessons were learnt from previous IT implementations, such as for MyWay+.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Yes. Every time we do an IT project, there are lessons learnt.

**MS CARRICK:** My next question is about how you reduce fragmentation in the public service. You have directorates. The Women's Budget Statement crosses directorates. When policy is developed, you have data, presumably you do some analysis and you work out your options. How do you ensure that all the stakeholders across directorates are involved and included in the development of policy? I will give you an example: sports and rec.

**Ms Leigh:** What do you mean by that as an example?

**MS CARRICK:** I am not sure of any strategy or policy around it or how it would include the health sector, in the context of how it improves mental health, connection and loneliness—all the things that sports and rec are good for. It would cross the whole public service. How do you bring it all together to make sure you have a good strategy that meets the objectives for everyone?

**Ms Leigh:** When a government strategy or policy is being developed, the lead area will, of course, go to all parts of the public service and seek input. There may be cross-directorate committees set up. Something like that would go to cabinet. That would go through a whole-of-government consultation process as part of going to cabinet. All ministers would be in cabinet. There are all the different layers. It is a standard policy development process to make sure that all relevant areas across government have been included in the development of that work.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you. If an area is not addressed in the policy, how would you escalate that? How would you let somebody know? People write, they do petitions and they do submissions. A whole element of the community may feel that they are not being listened to and that the policy does not include them. I do not even know what

the policy is about.

**Ms Leigh:** When people write to a minister, the minister will usually ask the relevant directorate to give them some advice on it, and then the minister will consider whether they want further work done on that issue or whether they are comfortable that it is actually addressed. As you have said, people write to ministers and they can do petitions. These are all ways in which issues are drawn to the attention of ministers, and ministers will then ask for advice on it, and, depending on the advice, a position will be taken.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** I note that the Chief Minister is appearing in relation to whole-of-government matters on 5 August. In terms of how policy is developed and the cabinet process around that, it is probably better addressed to him. I certainly would encourage constituents and particularly members, if they are getting queries, to start by looking at the ACT government website. There is a lot of information on ACT government websites, and sometimes answers are pretty readily found.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay. It is just that there is not one government funded indoor sports stadium in Canberra's south. I will leave it there.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** I think we are all aware of that issue. I do not think it is something that we are unaware of.

**MS TOUGH:** I want to talk about building workforce capability. Obviously, it is developed at a number of levels right through a person's career. Starting at the graduate level, how is the ACT public service placed to attract graduates? And what is being done to develop and support their capability and then support their retention within the ACT public service rather than losing them to the commonwealth or somewhere else?

**Ms Leigh:** I am always very proud that we are a very attractive service to work for. People have opportunities to know they are making a difference. They are respected and valued and they get to work across government in a team, so we attract a good field of graduates here. We have a well-developed program of training and development, including through rotations where they are exposed to a range of work and subject areas. That also makes it very attractive. Mr Wright can probably go into more detail about the nature of that program.

**Mr Wright:** Thanks very much, Ms Leigh. The ACTPS Graduate Program provides an important strategic talent and capability pipeline for the service. In the 2024 program, 45 graduates participated. Fifty-six per cent were from the ACT and 44 per cent were from interstate. Forty-four of the 45 graduates completed the program in late 2024. We had a 98 per cent completion rate, which is well and truly above our target of 85 per cent. One graduate withdrew for personal reasons. They do work experience across different roles, which I love. Being a former graduate myself, I think one of the great parts about it is rotation through different areas. It is an experience you do not get at any other time in your career.

Graduates also have a learning and development program which includes effective meetings; stakeholder engagement; project management, which is a very important part of it; problem-solving strategies; strategic thinking; key processes in government; and

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness. We have started on the track for our 2026 program, and we are looking forward to that being just as successful.

We also have a range of other entry-level programs that we use, including VET, and we are looking at doing more stuff in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entry-level recruitment too. We think there are some real opportunities in some of the programs that are run out of individual directorates—to look at those and see whether they are applicable right across the service.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you. Are those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entry-level programs currently in just a number of directorates?

**Mr Wright:** There are a number. Ms George, would you be happy to come to the table?

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you. I am interested in how they are operating in those directorates and are supporting people starting their career in the public service.

**Mr Wright:** While Ms George is taking a seat, I will talk about the one that we run in CMTEDD. That has been a very successful program. That one uses Australian school based apprenticeships. It brings students from ACT government schools in years 11 and 12 into positions within CMTEDD. They work about 10 to 12 hours a week. It provides a connection to the workforce and opportunities for people when they finish at school. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students finish school, they have an opportunity to work. When they have finished that Australian school based apprenticeship, they are given the option of permanent employment. It has been really successful. It has been worked up in conjunction with the Elected Body. It has been a really successful program to date. It is just one of many opportunities where we can do things at a whole-of-government level, which we think is advantageous. I will throw to Ms George.

**Ms George:** As Robert said, a number of different entry-level programs happen across directorates. CMTEDD is a particularly good example of Australian school based apprenticeships. From a whole-of-government perspective, we run the Vocational Employment Program, which is essentially a traineeship program. It goes for 12 to 18 months and participants complete study that aligns with their individual goals and is relevant to the job. In a commonwealth traineeship program they would often do, say, a diploma of government and they might be placed in a particular role, but here in the ACT the training is specific to their role or future career goals.

**MS TOUGH:** That is usually for school leavers?

**Ms George:** Yes; it could be for school leavers or it could be for people at different stages of their life as well. Perhaps they have come back after having children or are at other stages. We have quite a variety. The last program finished at the end of last year. We had 14 participants. Ten completed the program and four resigned during the 18-month term for personal reasons. It could be that they were moving interstate, it could be that they had a promotion elsewhere or it could be that something else was happening in their life. That is a really important part to share: it is not just about the numbers; it is also about what these employment pathways provide as they step in the door and what they go on to next.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you. That sounds great.

**MR EMERSON:** Ms Leigh, could you clarify for us the government's policy on reconciliation action plans?

**Ms Leigh:** The government's policy does not directly relate specifically to reconciliation action plans but rather to closing the gap in reconciliation more generally. Reconciliation action plans, formally so named, are plans endorsed by a particular organisation. Discussions with the Elected body have suggested that that is not necessarily the way that can be most effective for directorates, so while some directorates may have reconciliation action plans, others, including CMTEDD, have a plan, but it is not a plan of the type endorsed by that agency.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Braddock?

**MR BRADDOCK:** My question is for Ms Leigh. I am interested in what steps you take to ensure the ACTPS is both seen to be and is, actually, apolitical.

**Ms Leigh:** That is a fundamental tenet of our legislation. It sets out that that is one of the objectives of the ACT public service. It starts at all levels. If you want to go to the formal end, it is set out in the legislation. There are formal provisions. Then there is the training that we provide to people. There are the opportunities for performance review, should there be issues. Then it is probably right down to how I walk the talk.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Okay. Last year was election year. Were there any instances where politicisation of the ACTPS occurred in any way?

**Ms Leigh:** Not that I am aware of. I do not recall those issues. Of course, every time there is an election, we refresh our caretaker convention. We have a committee for any issues that public servants or directorates encounter, and when they want further advice, they go to that committee. There were a whole stream of minor, as I understand, issues that were being raised with the committee for advice. But I do not recall, last time, anything that was brought to my attention as significant. If there is something that you have in mind, I am happy to discuss it.

**MR BRADDOCK:** I want to dig further in terms of the training. Is that mandatory for all staff and what does that cover?

**Ms Leigh:** In terms of apolitical?

**MR BRADDOCK:** Yes.

**Ms Leigh:** When people join the public service, there is mandatory induction training which would cover that—there is a range of other training, for graduates etcetera, which would also cover it—and that is probably the specific point at which every single public servant would do it. Mr Wright might be able to provide more detail.

**Mr Wright:** Thanks, Mr Braddock. I can talk about training in this space. We have, as Ms Leigh pointed out, the ACTPS induction training and the *Induction Manual*, which

covers ACTPS values. We do training and presentations by our professional standards unit.

The graduate and the SES induction programs cover accountabilities of all staff, ACTPS values, and working with the ACT Integrity Commission and the Public Sector Standards Commissioner. Directorates, as well, have their own business contextualised training programs on the themes of integrity, fraud and ethics, ACTPS values, and, specifically, for senior officers, those requirements, and interactions with the ACT Integrity Commission.

There are two ACT Integrity Commission training packages on the whole-of-government learning platform. The annual report shows total participation of 12,702 public servants in integrity-specific learning courses in 2024-25.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Does that include senior executives being required to undertake that training? Do they have to do refreshers after a certain period of time?

**Mr Wright:** Sorry, Mr Braddock, do you mind repeating the question?

**MR BRADDOCK:** Do ACTPS senior executives need to undertake that training as mandatory, and do they have to do refreshers? If so, what is the period of time?

**Mr Wright:** In, for instance, CMTEDD, we have mandatory training and that has periods at which it needs to be retaken. When it needs to be retaken, that comes up in our learning management system. There is a reminder that comes through as part of our HRIMS. Mr Cocks, you were looking at me like you were not sure what I was talking about.

**THE CHAIR:** No, I was listening.

**Mr Wright:** So, indeed, Mr Braddock, there are renewals on at least some of that training.

**MR BRADDOCK:** I want to come back to Ms Leigh. You were saying you were demonstrating it by walking the walk.

**Ms Leigh:** Walking the talk.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Walking the talk, sorry. Can you please articulate exactly how you do that?

**Ms Leigh:** I think it is about being impartial and objective in everything you do as a public servant.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** A supplementary, Ms Castley?

**MS CASTLEY:** Ms Leigh, when a senior executive completes a declaration of their private interests, the document notes under “further interests” that: “It is not intended



that membership alone of political parties should be declared.” I am wondering if you could let the committee know when political party membership would need to be declared?

**Ms Leigh:** I think that is the final line of about four lines, so the previous lines go to what the point of that particular provision is. I am just trying to see if I can pull it up. You may have it in front of you, and you can remind me.

**MS CASTLEY:** No, I do not. I am wondering if you could let us know: when would political party membership need to be declared?

**Ms Leigh:** Yes. It would need to be declared if it created a conflict of interest.

**MS CASTLEY:** Would policy development work for a political party need to be declared?

**Ms Leigh:** That would depend. It is really hard to answer at large. You need, in each of these cases, to look at the particular circumstances as to whether the particular public servant had a conflict of interest.

**MS CASTLEY:** If the policy development work overlapped with their professional policy role, you would expect that the public servant would then declare that?

**Ms Leigh:** Again, I hesitate to say “yes” or “no”, but certainly, I would want to look at it.

**MS CASTLEY:** Are there any other requirements where senior executives disclose party membership to you or anyone else?

**Ms Leigh:** Not that I can recall.

**MS CASTLEY:** So as head of service you would not necessarily be aware of a group of executives in a particular agency who are all active members of a party.

**Ms Leigh:** The declarations of private interests that come to me are my direct reports, so all of the directors-general and my direct reports in CMTEDD. Apart from that, I do not see them.

**MS CASTLEY:** If a bunch of your directors-general or your senior executives were members of one particular party, would there be any concerns?

**Ms Leigh:** Again, it is not a situation that I am aware exists, and if that were the case, I would need to look at the particular circumstances to be able to answer that.

**MS CASTLEY:** If you are unaware of seeing it, is there a potential? Is that what you are telling me? You have seen declarations of interest of all your senior officials, and you are happy that there are not memberships within political parties that cross over policy development?

**Ms Leigh:** Ms Castley, I receive the DPIs of my direct reports, so that means I see the

DPIs of the directors-general, but nobody below them, and I see the DPIs of my direct reports in CMTEDD, so that is the deputy directors-general, my CFO and my head of corporate and my head of communications.

**MS CASTLEY:** So it is highly possible that at that senior executive level, across other directorates, there could be the potential for a number of senior executives, who are members of political parties, to be involved in policy writing?

**Ms Leigh:** I do not see those, so I cannot answer—

**MS CASTLEY:** Would that be a concern to you?

**Ms Leigh:** Again, it would depend on the particular circumstances. You would need to examine the particular case.

**MS CASTLEY:** Is it something that you would look into?

**Ms Leigh:** If there is a concern that somebody wanted to raise, then of course I would look into it.

**MS CASTLEY:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Emerson?

**MR EMERSON:** Have you received any complaints over the last, say, five years, about impartiality with senior public servants?

**Ms Leigh:** I cannot think of anything serious—for impartiality over the past five years and if I have had any complaints. But—whether there was something at the margins or something that got raised and ruled out—I cannot promise you I did not. Nothing springs to mind. I am confident that anything that has been raised, I dealt with properly.

**MR EMERSON:** Yes.

**Ms Leigh:** I am absolutely confident of that. In terms of a particular instance, I cannot be 100 per cent sure that I have not forgotten something, but it obviously was not horrific, if I have forgotten it.

**MR EMERSON:** Have you had any complaints raised specific to senior executives following the administrative arrangements?

**Ms Leigh:** No.

**MR EMERSON:** What about complaints or concerns—formal, informal, verbal or written—about any senior public servants failing to follow the appropriate ministerial reporting lines?

**Ms Leigh:** Sorry, what was it about the appropriateness of the reporting lines?

**MR EMERSON:** Failing to follow the appropriate ministerial reporting lines?

**Ms Leigh:** No.

**MR EMERSON:** None that you can recall in the last five years?

**Ms Leigh:** No.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Can you clarify, Mr Emerson, what you mean by “following appropriate ministerial reporting lines”? Do you mean reporting to ministers about another minister’s portfolio? Do you mean failing to brief ministers?

**MR EMERSON:** Either of those things. It might be a little different in this Assembly, but I can imagine that directors-general build close working relationships with their ministers. In the last Assembly we had two parties in cabinet. Obviously, you might have ministers who are away on leave, or who travel. If you have an acting minister, they would have different direct-reports during that period.

**Ms Leigh:** Yes.

**MR EMERSON:** That might make it difficult for a director-general to know whom to report to. I am wondering if you have ever had—

**Ms Leigh:** No, it would not. It would not, because there are clear acting arrangements.

**MR EMERSON:** So they should report to the acting minister in those situations?

**Ms Leigh:** Yes.

**MR EMERSON:** And you cannot recall any issues that have been raised in the last term about—

**Ms Leigh:** No.

**MR EMERSON:** that arrangement being followed?

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** It is practice, Mr Emerson, in some instances, while there is an acting minister, if a minister is overseas, still working and still contactable or even if on leave, that if there is either a very serious matter or an ongoing matter—I would expect the director-general in my portfolio to contact me directly. I would also expect them to brief the acting minister, if that was appropriate and necessary. But if I am away for a short period of time, I am still working, and there is no actual ministerial action that needs to be taken, I can imagine a circumstance where a director-general will come to the actual minister and advise them of a circumstance, or that both ministers would be briefed. I could imagine circumstances where either of those things might occur.

**MR EMERSON:** Okay.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** And that is in the context of having had some portfolios that involve very sensitive personal information, where, if there is no actual action that could be taken by the acting minister, but it is very important that the actual minister knows

about it, that information might go straight to the actual minister even though they are on leave and there is an acting minister. I can imagine circumstances like that.

**MR EMERSON:** Okay. I suppose I could imagine that as well. I am just wondering if that squares with what you have just said, Ms Leigh, though, about clear acting arrangements and reporting lines.

**Ms Leigh:** I think it depends, as the minister said, on exactly the circumstance in relation to that. The minister said, “there is no action to be taken”.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Yes, it is not about decision-making—so, a minister that is on leave, and there is an acting minister, cannot take a decision.

**MR EMERSON:** Is that reflected in policy somewhere?

**Ms Leigh:** I think it just—

**MR EMERSON:** Is it a matter for discretion?

**Ms Leigh:** I think it just goes back to basic Westminster. A minister on leave would not take a formal decision; that is clear. On the margins, there may be some practical arrangements, but it is not something that I am conscious of as a significant issue.

**MR EMERSON:** It has not been raised as an issue?

**Ms Leigh:** No, I do not believe so.

**THE CHAIR:** On a similar line, again, over the last five years, which is a useful time period, have there been any occasions, when there is more than one minister, when the incorrect minister was provided with information in relation to organisations? For example, Ms Stephen-Smith was health minister while there was a mental health minister.

**Ms Leigh:** I could not rule out mistakes.

**THE CHAIR:** And what do you have in place? There is quite a number of portfolios where this is the case now, where you have got multiple ministers who are all utilising the same workforce, essentially. How do people know who to go to, and what do you have in place to make sure the right minister is getting the right information on the right subject?

**Ms Leigh:** Ministers’ portfolios are set down in the administrative arrangements and in the appointment of ministers. That describes the portfolio, and then usually the directorate will have different arrangements, because it will come down to what is the most efficient way to organise your directorate.

**THE CHAIR:** Will staff have a single reporting line to a single minister?

**Ms Leigh:** Not necessarily, because it will depend on what is the most efficient way to organise the directorate.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** As someone who had ministerial responsibilities that crossed over, at times there were grey areas, particularly with Minister Davidson. We got together and determined who was going to be responsible for what, when it was not exactly clear in the AAs. We then wrote a joint letter to the Chief Minister to say, “This is what we have agreed. Is this okay?” That was for the exact purpose that you are talking about: so that our officials were really clear on exactly which minister they reported to on topics that looked like they might be in a grey area at the beginning of the term.

**Ms Leigh:** If I might add, Mr Cocks and Mr Emerson, the example the minister has just given probably, in part, goes to your question. Because if any of these issues did arise they are more likely to be resolved between the ministers than to involve me.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** Yes.

**MS CASTLEY:** Ms Leigh, I asked a few questions last week about the hierarchy of the ACT public service. Officials told me they were best put to you. So, given the ACT public service is a much smaller and a more concentrated service than the commonwealth public service, can you explain why the structure here is more hierarchical?

**Ms Leigh:** I disagree with you, Ms Castley, that it is more hierarchical. I think when you raised this previously, you talked about the number of levels. But that assumes that people go through each level, which is not correct.

We are very small but very diverse. We are not concentrated. We are small but diverse. So if you had a small number of fixed levels you would actually be less efficient in what the options were to organise your service. Some areas may be more efficiently organised using certain levels, others using different levels. For example, my CFO and my head of corporate are band 2s. They report directly to me. They do not go through a band 3; that would not be efficient.

Just because levels exist, it does not mean that decisions go through all of those levels. It is up to the DG to organise their directorate as efficiently as possible. Some types of service are highly operational, and there may be a large number of staff at the relatively lower levels of the public service. They may report to somebody who, in another area, would not have that many staff. But, given the nature of the work, that is an appropriate and efficient way to run that area. That person, for example, may be a SOG A. They may report directly to a band 2 sitting alongside other band 1s. It actually makes us more efficient and more cost effective than if we had less levels, so that we were forcing people up and then they had to go through every level. How many levels are available is really just one part of the picture.

**MS CASTLEY:** So everybody just knows the rules as to who reports to who?

**Ms Leigh:** That would be in the department’s organisational chart.

**MS CASTLEY:** I know I referred to this the other day: the Commonwealth Public Service Commission published a review of their hierarchy in 2022, which recommended moving down to eight levels. We do not want to talk about hierarchy; I

understand. We prefer levels. It is just streamlined decision-making. Can you explain to me, in a more detailed way than you have just done, how having 13 levels is actually better? Because it still looks as though there are 13 levels that people need to—

**Ms Leigh:** If you look at the organisational charts of directorates, you will find that is not the case. As I said, one of the ironies is that if you went down to far fewer levels then all those staff would have to be fitted into those levels. You would be pushing a lot of staff up into more expensive positions.

We have different levels available, but it is not just different levels. If you go to our Canberra Health Services, you have all your medical specialists. They do not fit precisely into any of those levels. We are a very diverse service and having a wide range of options so that directors-general can organise their directorates in the most efficient way possible gives us the most flexibility.

**MS CASTLEY:** How is ACT different? If you look across New South Wales or Victoria, their size is much larger than ours. My understanding is that we have four senior executives. New South Wales have four and Victoria have four. Our size is much smaller compared to them. With middle management, we have three. New South Wales have two and Victoria have two. In the junior management area it is six, four and four. I am just wondering how that works better and is then—

**Ms Leigh:** The larger you are then the more scope there is to have people reporting through all the layers, because you have numbers. But when you are small, that does not necessarily make sense, because you are trying to get the most efficient use out of your resources.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** One of the things I would reflect on here—and I think it goes back to something Ms Leigh said earlier—is giving that flexibility, particularly when we are talking about having retained the SOG B and SOG A levels as opposed to merging them into what is the EL2 level in the commonwealth.

Say you want to a particularly senior leader to lead a complex piece of policy work; you want a SOG A to be leading that work. But there may not be a SOG B in the team; there may be a couple of SOG Cs and a couple of ASO6s, or whatever it looks like, and a graduate. But you have been able to say, ‘I have identified this position as at the top of the EL2 band, and I am very clearly advertising it as a top EL2 band position’. So you are able to right-size your positions.

I do not particularly have a strong view about what is better or what is worse. But there are clearly advantages in being able to right-size the position, and then not necessarily require every level to be in every team.

**MS CASTLEY:** So back to your point that smaller and more levels is better, would you be looking to increase the number of levels that we have got?

**Ms Leigh:** No, I think we are about right. And, of course, we constantly review. It is just an ongoing process of looking at how we are most effective and efficient, and where the next opportunity is to take one more step towards being more efficient and effective. So, I would never rule anything out. But I just wanted to clarify that the number of

levels available is not the same thing as using every level for every part of the public service.

**Ms Stephen-Smith:** In terms of classification levels and types, this is an ongoing conversation through our enterprise agreement bargaining as well. A couple of agreements ago, we established an entire new structure for child protection practitioners that did not previously exist, because they needed some different things. They needed to recognise some different skills, because most health professionals do not, for example, write up affidavits for court and regularly attend court. Child protection practitioners do. So, we also do work with our staff and unions to understand what is needed across the very diverse workforce.

**MS CASTLEY:** Okay.

**THE CHAIR:** Can I just get a quick clarification, and then I think it is probably time we wind up. Regarding the point that you are making about the levels: it sounds like what you are saying is that you have a lot of levels, but you do not necessarily always use them. And not having to use every level is where the value lies. Is that correct?

**Ms Leigh:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Now, have you considered the advantages of broad-banding? We started to talk about this the other day as well. In that: you certainly do not have to use every level; you can place people at different levels across a broadband as well. Federally, there seems to have been quite some significant advantages found in that space.

**Ms Leigh:** I think the federal public service is quite different from the ACT public service. They are much more homogeneous. They do not have bus drivers, and they do not have nurses, or teachers, or people mowing their lawns. We are incredibly diverse. And most federal public servants are office-based staff. Some have service delivery functions—

**THE CHAIR:** I would probably contend that places like Customs or the AFP would not appreciate that.

**Ms Leigh:** Yes, true. I agree with you, Mr Cocks. But what I am saying is: if you look overall at the commonwealth public service, it is very large and relatively similar across it—and I do not think the AFP follow the commonwealth basic public service structures anyway. If you look at ours, we are very small and incredibly diverse. And so, the more flexibility we have to avoid trying to jam people into the same categories, or to go through every level, the more effective and efficient we can be.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay.

**Ms Leigh:** And, if I could also say to your comment about people being placed within a broadband: either that is the same thing as simply having more layers and it is just a different name for it, or people move up in the band. Whereas in our service, the job is classified at a certain level and then people apply to move into higher level jobs if they choose.

**Mr Wright:** Mr Cocks, just getting back to your question in regard to AI assurance framework.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr Wright:** I have confirmed that that can be provided. I will provide a copy to the secretary.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much.

Since we have gone past time: 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. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. And 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.

Now I will jump back in, 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 5.08 pm.**