



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2026-2027

(Reference: [Inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2026-2027 and Appropriation
\(Office of the Legislative Assembly\) Bill 2026-2027](#))

Members:

**MS C BARRY (Chair)
MR T EMERSON (Deputy Chair)
MR A BRADDOCK
MR T WERNER-GIBBINGS**

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 3 JULY 2026

This is a **PROOF TRANSCRIPT** that is subject to suggested corrections by members and witnesses. The **FINAL TRANSCRIPT** will replace this transcript within 20 working days from the hearing date, subject to the receipt of corrections from members and witnesses.

**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.

WITNESSES

BERRY, MS ASHLEE , Executive Director, ACT and Capital Region, Property Council of Australia	74
BOWLES, DR DEVIN , Chief Executive Officer, ACT Council of Social Service ..	33
BOWLES, MS NICOLE , Chair, Community Sport Alliance of the ACT	98
BRADY, MR MICHAEL , Executive Officer, Community Sport Alliance of the ACT	98
BURROUGHS, MS ANGELA , Branch President, Australian Education Union, ACT Branch	62
COPLAND, DR SIMON , Executive Director, Conservation Council ACT Region...	1
CRIMMINS, MS FRANCES , Chief Executive Office, YWCA Canberra	48
DOBSON, MS CORINNE , Chief Executive Officer, ACT Shelter	33
DWYER, MS LEAH , Director of Policy and Advocacy, YWCA Canberra	48
EHMANN, MS KATHY , Executive Director, SEE Change	1
ELLIOTT, MS VERONICA , Executive Officer, ACT Parents	62
FANNING, MS KATRINA , Secretariat Team Member, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body	15
HARFORD, MR GREG , Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Business Chamber....	24
JUDGE, MR PATRICK , Branch Secretary, Australian Education Union, ACT Branch	62
KARLSSON, MS TIFFANY , Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre...	48
KELLY, MS LISA , Chief Executive Officer, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT	83
LAMB, MS JESSICA , Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Health Care Consumers Association	92
MARSHALL, DR DAVID , Chair, Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum.....	24
NAIK, MS SMERA , Policy and Training Officer, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT	83
PRIERGAARD, MR JACOB , Senior Policy Adviser, ACT Council of Social Service.....	33
ROSENMAN, MS ELENA , Chief Executive Officer, Women’s Legal Centre ACT..	48
SANDILANDS, MS JENNY , Head of Policy, ACT Council of Social Service	33
WEBECK, MS SUE , Chief Executive Officer, Domestic Violence Crisis Service ..	48
WENSING, DR ED , Honorary Secretary, ACT Shelter	33

Privilege statement

The Assembly has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting of these proceedings.

All witnesses making submissions or giving evidence to committees of the Legislative Assembly for the ACT are protected by parliamentary privilege.

“Parliamentary privilege” means the special rights and immunities which belong to the Assembly, its committees and its members. These rights and immunities enable committees to operate effectively, and enable those involved in committee processes to do so without obstruction, or fear of prosecution.

Witnesses must tell the truth: giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter, and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, it may take evidence in-camera if requested. Confidential evidence will be recorded and kept securely. It is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly; but any decision to publish or present in-camera evidence will not be taken without consulting with the person who gave the evidence.

Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.02 am

COPLAND, DR SIMON, Executive Director, Conservation Council ACT Region
EHMANN, MS KATHY, Executive Director, SEE Change

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to this public hearing of the Select Committee on Estimates 2026-2027 for the inquiry into Appropriation Bill 2026-2027 and Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2026-2027. 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 contributions 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 are attending today's event.

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

We welcome witnesses from the Conservation Council ACT Region and SEE Change. As we are not inviting opening statements, I will now proceed to the first question. My first question is around the Climate Change Strategy. The government has committed around \$100 million over four years to deliver the next ACT Climate Change Strategy and action plan.

Dr Copland: It is \$10 million.

THE CHAIR: Sorry—\$10 million. \$100 million is a lot of money. You would love \$100 million!

MS LEE: Is that an announcement?

Dr Copland: Can it please be \$100 million? That would be great!

THE CHAIR: There is no question here! Does the council know what the funding would actually be spent on? Would it go towards tangible emission reductions rather than planning and administration?

Dr Copland: Thank you for that question. That is a very good question. We have had some indication of where some of that money is going, particularly to some community group initiatives. Specific funding is going to groups such as Landcare ACT, ACT Wildlife and the National Parks Association, for example. Another bucket of money—\$200,000 a year for three years—is going to community groups to do mitigation and adaptation measures, which we welcome. However, we are unclear about where the rest of that funding will be going. Our concern is that a lot of that money is going to be spent on policy work and finalising the Climate Change Strategy,

which expired a year and a half ago. What we want to see is funding going into programs—and it does not have to be community group programs; it could be government-run programs—to directly reduce emissions and help the city adapt to climate change.

THE CHAIR: Do you know how much is going to each community group, such as Landcare and ACT Wildlife? Do you have a breakdown?

Dr Copland: That is why I have my computer, so I can get the exact funding. There is a total of \$540,000 over three years for three groups. If my maths is correct, I believe ACT Wildlife is getting \$100,000 per year, Landcare ACT is getting \$50,000 per year, and the rest is for the National Parks Association, which I believe is getting \$30,000 per year.

THE CHAIR: So, of the \$10 million, essentially \$540,000 is going to—

Dr Copland: There is \$540,000 going to those groups. There is another \$600,000 going to community groups to do climate mitigation and adaptation work. We do not really know how that is going to be handed out. All of that put together is just over a million dollars of that \$10 million. That is where we know the funding is going. Regarding the rest, we are not clear about how it is being distributed.

THE CHAIR: Around 10 per cent is going to—

Dr Copland: Community groups.

THE CHAIR: You have probably answered my other question: are you concerned this funding may not translate into real action?

Dr Copland: Yes; it is definitely a concern. This is something that we see play out a bit within the ACT government: funding announcements are made, but they go to policy work—and policy work is important, obviously—or work on developing more strategy documents. We are at the end of the need for more strategies. We need practical work to reduce our emissions and adapt to climate change.

THE CHAIR: What suggestions would you have in terms of where you think that money would probably be better suited? If you were on the other side of the table, what would you be doing?

Dr Copland: We know that there are a number of specific areas where we need reduce our emissions. The two biggest areas of emissions that still are happening in the ACT are related to transport and the phase-out of gas. On the latter one, for example, we know that more work needs to be done to support complexes—apartment blocks and townhouses, for example—to phase out the use of fossil fuel. That is going to be essential. The use of gas is going to phase out. That is inevitable, whether the government invests in that or not, and we do not want people being left behind and facing higher gas costs because they are using older infrastructure. Supporting those more difficult transitions is going to be really important.

On transport, the biggest thing we are going to spend money on is greater investment in public and active transport. We need more buses on the roads and we need more bike paths. The ACT government made a big deal. They announced one bike path in this budget, which is a bike path from Hall to Gold Creek, which is a great bike path, but it is nowhere near enough to really encourage people to get on their bikes and have more choice in their transport. We could be investing directly in these things.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: You mentioned whether it might be a government or a community program. What do you think would be the most effective community programs that the government should be investing in to reduce our emissions?

Dr Copland: That is a good question. Community groups do a lot. SEE Change could probably speak better to the work that community groups do on reducing emissions. One of the things that we were happy to see re-invested in was the Electric Bike Library. I am sure Kathy will talk about that. Community groups can do a lot to support the community through education and direct programs to support individuals who might want to reduce their emissions or might want to do things to adapt to climate change. It is important that there is investment in that, but we also need government work because the government has a systemic, whole-of-city approach that a lot of community groups cannot achieve.

MR BRADDOCK: I will let Ms Ehmann answer that question, if she wishes.

Ms Ehmann: I would very much agree with that: the bike infrastructure really needs work. I am very happy to see that cargo bikes are going to be included in the Sustainable Household Scheme. That is excellent. Cargo bikes are quite wide and there is no space on the bike paths for a cargo bike to pass another bike. That infrastructure needs to be better and there needs to be more maintenance. We get a lot of feedback from people who borrow bikes through our library. They say that they think bike riding is great and they would do a whole lot more of it if the bike paths felt safer, if they were better maintained, if there was more lighting, if they were wider, and those sorts of things. Absolutely, more money going into those sorts of projects would be brilliant.

MR BRADDOCK: That brings me back to where we joked about \$100 million or \$10 million. Is \$10 million over four years actually sufficient for the challenge of climate change?

Ms Ehmann: No.

Dr Copland: No. It is a pretty simple answer: no.

MR BRADDOCK: Why? Could you please provide a bit more information as to why you came to that view?

Dr Copland: We can look at the question of transport, for example. One of the things that we will constantly point out is that, as I said, we got one bike path funded through this ACT budget. I do not have the exact funding, but we spent something like

\$330,000 on that path. I could probably find out some way to get the exact number, but I will just—

MR BRADDOCK: That is all right.

Dr Copland: At the same time, the government invests in William Hovell Drive, for example. Duplication of one lane of that road costs over \$100 million. We were joking about \$100 million being a huge amount of money, but, if we were to find \$100 million to spend on active travel infrastructure, when you consider that one path costs about \$330,000, we could see quite a lot of investment very quickly. This is about increasing people's choice. Research—and there is plenty of research—shows that more people want to get on bikes, but they do not feel safe doing so. Exactly as Kathy said, the maintenance is not good enough, the paths are not good enough, and people do not feel safe in using them. The government is doing things to densify our city. It is a perfect opportunity to look at new developments—for example, in the Northern Gateway, in the Southern Gateway and around EPIC—and say, “Before we build denser apartments here, we should be ensuring that there are good paths and good infrastructure,” so that people do not move there and immediately hop in a car and congest our streets but, instead, have the opportunity to hop on a bike and feel safe in doing so. We could find that money, but the government decides not to.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

MS LEE: Thank you for your attendance this morning. In terms of the government-initiated programs—and you spoke a lot about transport—are there any others that you would say would be priorities from the government's perspective? We have heard about community and we have heard about transport.

Dr Copland: I believe the government are doing some of this work behind the scenes, but they probably need to talk to the community more—particularly as we transition away from gas—about what the grid looks like and what we need to do to ensure we have a continuous sustainable energy supply. That is something we have certainly heard from our members. In the news, we have seen brownouts, for example in Molonglo Valley. How do we continue to have a continuous sustainable energy supply? How we do that is going to be a technical challenge that we will have to face and will have a serious conversation about as a community.

As I said, the gas transition is happening. People are jumping off gas. In fact now, because of the fuel crisis, more people are buying electric vehicles, which is putting more pressure on our grid. We are 100 per cent renewable here in the ACT, but we will have to keep investing in energy because our energy needs will keep growing. That is a really important conversation that needs to be had. It would be good to see where the government is investing in that. That particular area is a bit unclear. That is certainly one concern.

The other area for us would be around adaptation and what it looks like to adapt. The government has made a lot about their tree planting program, which is a really great program. That is really important. One of the most basic things is that, for example, the Bureau of Meteorology have said that we are about to hit a big El Nino year, which means we are going to have a very hot and dry year. At the same time that they

have done that, the ACT government have announced that they are closing libraries on the weekends, which are cool places that people can go. We are in an energy crisis and people may not be able to afford their own cooling on those days, so closing down libraries on weekends seems like an illogical choice. Things like that are small investments that are really important, not just for community services but also for adaptation to climate change into the future, so we need to have a real conversation about how we can support community members in those things—not just heat but also bushfires, bigger storms, and those types of things. We cannot just do it all with trees, although trees are important.

MS LEE: Absolutely. You spoke about how you are aware of a pretty small percentage of what the \$10 million is going to. In a perfect world, what would it look like for the government to engage with you to keep you updated about what that funding is for?

Dr Copland: That is a very good question. To be frank, we had a meeting with the minister earlier this week—us two and the Canberra Environment Centre—where we asked this question. We are hoping to get more information soon, but it is unclear what the process is going to be to figure that out. It is a funny one: they have announced something and made a big cheer about it, but we do not see the detail. Ideally, you would see the detail announced when they make the announcement in the first place. What is likely to happen is that they will make further announcements which just re-announce the funding that they have already announced.

I think I am not speaking out of turn when I say that we have found some of the consultation procedures around the Climate Change Strategy a bit poor. We can compare that to the engagement we have had around the Nature Conservation Strategy, which has been amazing. It has been really excellent. They have made an announcement, but we would like to see proper engagement with community groups, asking, “What should be the top priorities in terms of spending?”—whether it is community group funding or government programs—and having some say over that process.

MR EMERSON: I have a quick supplementary question, jumping back to the previous question from Ms Lee. I am wondering about your level of confidence in the Climate Change Strategy and this area of policy being able to drive change across government. Obviously, \$10 million is nowhere near enough to actually implement all of the changes that we need to see at a systemic level. Do you have confidence that this kind of strategy can actually make that happen—that the spending that is happening in the Education Directorate, the City and Environment Directorate and other areas will actually be informed by the strategy?

Ms Ehmann: I do not think so. The Climate Change Strategy, on the face of it, seems like a good strategy. There are good words, there are good aims, good—

THE CHAIR: Motherhood statements.

Ms Ehmann: Motherhood statements. But there is not very much of: “This is what we’re going to deliver, this is who is going to do it, and this is when it is going to be done.” There was a lot of consultation on development of the strategy. I went to a

couple of those sessions and it felt very much like those inputs were not necessarily incorporated into the document. The government could do very little and still look back at that strategy and give themselves a big tick, because it is vague.

Dr Copland: When the first strategy came out, we initially wrote that it was not worth the paper that it is written on, because it had all those motherhood statements. Anybody could write those kinds of statements. We understand that the minister's intention is to have a framework and then have action plans following that. That is what we are really looking to: what are the action plans? There should be, in my mind, a clear to-do list—not just an action plan of the things we might consider doing. It should be: “We’re doing this and we have assigned public servants to start this work.”

I would much rather the government came to us and said, “Here are the things we’re doing”—not necessarily everything we want, but we can argue and talk about the things that we want. We could be up-front about it. What I find in a lot of government strategies is a lot of motherhood statements that say, “We’ll investigate this. We’ll consider this.” They try to please everybody, but you have a situation at the end of that where people expect that it will be done, but what really happens is that they have one public servant looking at it for a couple of days and saying, “This is not actually feasible,” and ticking it off—“We investigated it.” Then the community ends up being disappointed because they did not get what they thought was going to happen. So let’s be honest about what we are doing and then we, as a community, can talk about what is missing and what needs to be done as part of that. The minister has said that they are going to have action plans. We are really looking to that as the first sign of actually understanding what the government intends to do.

MR EMERSON: Do you know when the final strategy and first action plan are due?

Dr Copland: We were told “soon”. I believe that the first action plan will be released at the same time as the strategy is released.

MR EMERSON: Simultaneous.

Dr Copland: It will be the first one. It will not be the only action plan, which is important.

MR EMERSON: I want to ask about the Nature Conservation Strategy. Thanks for raising that. Were you expecting dedicated funding in the budget for delivery of that strategy?

Dr Copland: Yes. We were hoping that it would have been the case, because it is an ambitious strategy. It is one of the better strategies that I have seen written by the ACT government in that it has very clear plans about what they are going to do and clear deadlines, but, for its ambition, we need to see it being funded, particularly the creation of a nature conservation network. We know that on-the-ground support for nature work is nowhere near enough in the ACT. It is nowhere near enough anywhere in the country. We have a great reserve system, but the reserves are poorly managed and infested with weeds. We now have a document that will expand that system in some sense. It will not be a nature reserve system; it will be a nature conservation network. We need to have funding to have the people, the boots on the ground, to

actually look after the network that we are going to create. We really welcome the creation of a nature conservation network, but it will not mean anything if we just put lines on a map and then biodiversity, nature, is left to degrade.

One of the things that we have been calling for consistently—Tom, as part of your confidence and supply agreement—is a commitment to 10 new rangers. That money has still not been put in a budget, which means that we are likely to wait until the next budget. We asked this question at the ACTCOSS forum, the ministers forum, and Minister Tara Cheyne said that some of that money might come through the voluntary redundancy process that is happening at the City and Environment Directorate—that the money that is saved from that will then be directed to frontline workers, which we think is a good approach. We still want to see that. Even then, 10 is not going to be enough to really manage our reserve network. It is interesting that we have the \$10 million announcement for the Climate Change Strategy, but we do not have a comparative announcement for the Nature Conservation Strategy, because work needs to be done to make that a reality.

MR EMERSON: In the draft strategy, there are two clear targets. And I agree that it is a good strategy, with deadlines to be achieved by 2026, this year, including mapping out the priority conservation areas, and four are to be achieved by 2027. With the lack of targeted funding and the lack of funding for more park rangers and so on, does that bring into question whether those will be met?

Dr Copland: Yes, possibly. I cannot remember which will be done by 2027. Sorry—I do not have all the targets in front of me—

MR EMERSON: That is okay.

Dr Copland: but, regarding the mapping work that is supposed to be done by the end of 2026, we know that is being undertaken already by current staff. I do not think that there is a concern that that work will not be done, when they have the skills of current officers to achieve that. We have been pushing to ensure that community groups are involved in some of those processes. We are concerned about a nature conservation network being developed behind closed doors, because the ideal of this is that you create a network that the government and community agree upon that stops a bunch of fights over particular sites—whether they are going to be developed in the future. We do not have to continuously campaign on these sites and people do not have to have the worry: “Is my patch of nature going to be the next on the chopping block?” Doing it with the community is really important so that the community can have a say. We also have a bunch of experts who know this stuff. The expertise does not just sit in government. We have been pushing to have a seat at the table—not just us but also other groups—for that process, and that has not happened yet. Given that it is supposed to be done by the end of 2026, we are concerned about whether it is really going to be achievable.

MR EMERSON: You would think that would be critical. You have volunteer groups, often with government funding, cultivating certain patches of nature, and you would want to make sure that is captured. This is something I have asked questions about previously, as I am sure you have too—whether, until this point, any of that has actually been mapped. It seems that it has not been.

Dr Copland: Yes. The other component of that is that it is not just about mapping which areas are currently of value. If community groups, for example, did investment, what would have high nature value into the future? We have seen that most clearly with the grasslands in Ainslie. A community group has government funding to regenerate an area, and then a different part of the government has approved a development application on that exact site, so the funding that has gone into regenerating an area has been completely wasted because they are just going to bulldoze the whole thing. That community group has said there are plenty of opportunities. There is the mobile phone tower. They said, “There are a whole bunch of other sites around here that could go, but we have spent our time regenerating this site, so please don’t waste all of our work.” There is no talking to each other. The ideal of nature conservation network is that we stop that conflict by having an overarching document that says, “These are the legally protected areas. There could still be a park or a roadside, for example, but it has biodiversity values, so we are not going to destroy those components of it.”

We want to see that come out very soon because it is going to be really important for the planning of our city into the future that we have that conversation and that we have that network mapped out. It will also help us with future housing development, for example, to be able to say where we think the future development is going to come from.

MR EMERSON: You mentioned invasive species, including weeds. I noticed in your budget response media release that you welcome the new community weeds grants as a positive measure. Obviously, invasives are mentioned a lot throughout the draft Nature Conservation Strategy. Do you think that the funding that has been provided for that is sufficient?

Dr Copland: The short answer is no. I cannot remember the exact date, but the Nature Conservation Strategy has a target for weeds. It is about reversing the invasiveness of weeds. It is for some time in the 2030s. A big task would be needed. We know that it takes a lot of investment and a lot of work, and \$50,000 a year for three years is a drop in the ocean for that kind of work. When we talk about weeds, the ACT government has what I would say is a defeatist approach—a belief that this is just too hard.

We have had lots of conversations with the government about, for example, African lovegrass in the last six months, and they effectively tell us that it is too late, but then we talk to farmers who are managing their land and they have land that is empty of African lovegrass because they invest the time and money in doing so. I have been to properties where that is done, and then you cross the border into a nature reserve that is covered in weeds. We know it can happen, because farmers are required to do it, and, in fact, the ACT government forces farmers to do it, but they will not do it for their own land. African lovegrass is not just a concern biodiversity-wise; it is also a major fire risk, particularly in the west, where fires in the ACT often come from. So there is a safety risk associated with this weed. The \$50,000 a year is nice, but it is not going to get us very far.

MR BRADDOCK: Do you think the government is on track to achieve its targets for nature conservation? Also, what would you like to see from nature conservation legislation that is meant to be coming through sometime soon?

Dr Copland: The short answer is no, we will not be on target, and funding is a big part of that question. The weed target is an example. It is a great target that they have set. I cannot remember the exact date, so I apologise, but—

MR EMERSON: It is 2035.

Dr Copland: you have to have investment to make that a reality. As I said, \$50,000 a year for community groups is nice, and some groups will take that money and do some really great work with it, but it is not going to get us where we really need to get to. Your second question was about legislation?

MR BRADDOCK: Nature conservation legislation. What would you like to see from that?

Dr Copland: There are a few things. We know that the development of the priority conservation areas and the nature conservation network need to be legislated. The idea of this is that we have nature reserves, and then we have a second level of protection provided for places that might have other uses but still have biodiversity protection on them. That needs to be legislated so that they are legally protected. We want to make sure that is put in the Nature Conservation Act and not just put in a policy document, because, if it is a policy document, it can be overridden. That is really important. We have had some indication that that is what is going to happen. There are a couple of other measures within the Nature Conservation Strategy that need to be legislated, including the development of stewardship programs for landholders so that they can have the incentive to look after their properties. Landholders tell us all the time that they are sort of forced to look after their properties, but they do not get the funding and support to do it. I think that is really important.

The government are also talking about a new funding mechanism to help fund nature conservation. We are looking to see the details of that. We do not want it to become a pay-to-destroy model, which is what is happening in other parts of the country, where they effectively say, “If you just put a bit of money over here, you can destroy whatever you want.” We do not want that. We are keeping an eagle eye on that to make sure that is not what happens.

MS LEE: Dr Copland, you talked about the difference in weed management by farmers and the by government, which does not do the same thing. What is it that the farmers are doing that the government is not doing? And do they actually talk to each other? Are there lessons that the government can learn from seeing how the farmers do it?

Dr Copland: I am not a weed expert, so I cannot tell you about the specific techniques that they use. I think the biggest difference in those properties is that you have more dedicated human hours. We know that rangers in the ACT are spread across multiple reserve sites. They do not have the resources, so they will only get short periods of time at each reserve that they are managing. They often have

volunteer groups, but their volunteer groups might do one session a month, or something like that. That is not criticising them. They are doing great work; there just isn't the personal investment. With farmers, you have people who are dedicated to their land the whole time. Investment in people can be the difference. The Rural Landholders' Association is talking to the ACT government all the time. I am sure that techniques are being shared. Conversations are happening, and there have been joint workshops and things between the government and landholders. That is happening. I do not think it is a lack of knowledge of techniques; it is a lack of investment to make it happen.

MR EMERSON: Do you think we are using technology enough in weeding? As you said, \$50,000 a year to get people out there weeding is not a huge amount of money. There are a lot of weeds and a lot of space to cover. There are drones and AI. This is something that we could be investing in.

Dr Copland: I do not know how to answer that question. Possibly yes, but, as I said, I am a policy person; I am not a weed management expert.

MR EMERSON: We can ask Parks and Conservation when they are on. That is all right. Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: Both of your organisations have just gone through a procurement process. What was your experience of that? Was there any uplift in your funding, or otherwise? Were there any benefits to the ACT out of that procurement process? Also, were any lessons learnt that could be applied to tranche 2, which applies to the catchment groups that are currently going through that?

Ms Ehmann: Thank you for that question. It was a really difficult process. I have been in this position only for a year. It was a really long process and a lot happened before I arrived. There was a lot of confusion about how the process was going to go. I think there were a lot of mixed messages. There were some questions that the minister's office said were for the department's decision, and then the department said they were for the minister's decision. There was quite a bit of that. No; there was not an uptick in funding, although we did get the funding boost that came through. That was great. There is a new requirement to comply with the Secure Local Jobs Code, so we had to pay for auditors to give us that accreditation, and—

MR BRADDOCK: Sorry—how much did you have to pay to get that accreditation?

Ms Ehmann: We paid \$500.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you. Sorry—please continue.

Ms Ehmann: One of the requirements of the Secure Local Jobs Code, as I am sure you are aware, is that we need to employ local people, which, for our organisation, is—

MR EMERSON: It is going to be difficult.

Ms Ehmann: That is all that we do—and that we have to provide job security for our employees, which is certainly our preference. However, because our core funding is quite low, we have to apply over and over for smaller grants through the year. Obviously that pool is getting smaller, so we are investing all of this time and energy into applying for grants that we probably will not get. When we do get those grants, it is specifically stated in the deed that we cannot use existing staff to deliver the project, so we need to either bring in short-term contracted staff or outsource, which is not secure employment. We did not love it.

MR BRADDOCK: Dr Copeland, do you have any views as well?

Dr Copland: It was a pretty awful process. It ran for over 12 months, if you take into account the conversations we had with the directorate. They did a “review” of our funding, which we had no say or influence over. There was no consultation with us about that review. It resulted in no changes to our funding levels—the funding went to the same three groups in exactly the same way—but it took countless public service hours and countless hours for us. We were told, “We’re going to make this easier, so we are going to have a two-step process.” I understood that, if there is an expression of interest as a starting process, what that could mean is that, for example, if we are the only group that put in for the expression of interest—and I would not be surprised if we were, because there are not many people who do what we do—then we do not have to go through the second process. What happened is that they said, “No; you still have to go through the second process.” So there was a situation where they tried to make it easy, but they actually made us do two lots of processes rather than one, which made it extremely more difficult.

The second round of the process was released. I cannot remember the exact dates, but it was basically in December and due in January. So the time that I would normally spend planning my year, having a bit of a break and getting ready was spent doing all of the tender work. The way it was done was not particularly nice. It was just a big waste of time and money for everybody involved.

The other thing I would say is that the Secure Local Jobs process is a great example. We also have to do stuff like fill out paperwork to show that we comply with modern slavery requirements, and employment workplace relations paperwork. To me, all of this stuff seems to be written for, basically, the construction industry, where there are real issues associated with that, but it was applied to small community groups. When we were doing our modern slavery stuff, I was saying, “Sometimes I buy some stuff from Officeworks.” You are checking your supply chain for this. It seems that it is not fit for purpose. They said, “Here is the process we use for big businesses. Let’s apply that to the tiny organisations that get less than \$200,000 a year in funding.” It was not fit for purpose. It made us do a lot of work, and we stopped doing the work that we wanted to do, which is to work on environmental issues for the community.

MR BRADDOCK: Ms Ehmann, please correct me if I summarise your position incorrectly. It appears that the government policy around the Secure Local Jobs Code was contradicting the exact design of the grants process in which you operate.

Ms Ehmann: Absolutely.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

Ms Ehmann: The other thing that I would add to what Simon said is that, when we raised the complexity of the two-stage process and how it felt like a bit of overkill, we were told that we needed to go through this process because the government needed to be assured that it was getting value for money. Absolutely, if the government are paying millions of dollars for a road, they would want to know that they are getting value for money, but we are getting \$135,000 a year. The suggestion that the government might not be getting value for money is offensive.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: This is a specific question and probably goes beyond policy. It is about Lake Tuggeranong. The 10-year plan has just been released. Has your organisation been involved in feedback to discuss how this might look as a model for other lakes? Lake Ginninderra is going to need some work.

Dr Copland: We saw the announcement about the 10-year plan and we are generally pretty happy with how that plan is looking. It is good to see a plan that is an actual plan, which is quite a nice change in some ways, that there is a commitment to funding to actually make that happen, and that there are targets associated with that—for example, targets around the reduction in algal blooms within Lake Tuggeranong. They are set targets. The government is being really honest, which is refreshing, saying, “We’re not saying that there are not going to be algal blooms into the future, but we’re doing the work to reduce those algal blooms.”

The biggest issue for the health of our waterways—particularly the lakes—is run-off. It is nutrient build-up. All of the creeks get a lot of leaf litter, construction litter, gardening fertilisers, and those types of things. It goes into the lakes, creates the nutrient problems and then algal blooms occur. We see a plan that has targeted that. We are looking at increased sweeping around the areas and community education for gardeners. A lot of people would not realise that what they are doing in their gardening is maybe having an impact on the health of the waterways, so I think people would welcome that. It is not a lecturing situation; it is a situation of saying, “So that you know, this is the kind of impact it has.” Those kinds of programs are little things, not big silver bullets. They are small things that will build up to increase the health of the waterways. We are really happy to see that.

I think you are right. Lake Ginninderra is a great example of where similar work will need to be done. We are concerned about the health of the waterways in general. There was some great investment in Healthy Waterways programs. The naturalisation of, for example, Tuggeranong Creek is a great program. We are not seeing similar work being done. There have been—

THE CHAIR: It is in the next session.

Dr Copland: a lot of conversations about, for example, Yarralumla Creek recently—I just saw Ms Carrick walk in—and the damage that was done to Yarralumla Creek due to the storm earlier this year, and whether there are opportunities to naturalise that, which will have benefits to the health of the waterways, particularly Lake Burley Griffin. We are not getting anywhere with that. There is one thing we have pushed for in the development of North Curtin. There is going to be a water park, an ecosystem

park, that is not going to do anything to the actual creek, from what we understand. That will again be an opportunity. If we are going to put millions of dollars into developing new housing, some of that money should maybe go into re-naturalising that part of the creek. There are opportunities to learn from this. We are happy to see what is happening with Lake Tuggeranong, but I think it could be spread out further.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: There is the focus in the plan on assisting and advising members of the community. As you said, gardeners, light industry and that sort of thing are impacting run-off. Do your organisations have ideas about how to best land that? What are the messages in terms of: “Dear homeowner, the less nitrogen you use on your front lawn the far better it is down the track for the lake”? How do you land those messages, as opposed to: “Don’t do that. We are all in this together”—that sort of thing? What resonates?

Dr Copland: I do not have one about this specific issue, but I can talk broadly. It is exactly what you are saying: do not lecture but work with the community and make them feel part of the project. One thing that we would both recognise from working with the community is that the Canberra community really cares about our environment and wants to do the right thing. For example, we find an increasing number of volunteers coming through every week, which is contradictory to all other volunteer-type organisations. Volunteering numbers are generally dropping, but, in the environment sector, they are going up, and I think it is because people really care and they are concerned. So, when we have a conversation about how they can do things, we often find that Canberrans are willing to step up. It is about providing the information and doing it in this way: “We’re in it together to protect our nature and care for part of the city that we love.” I expect that Canberrans would step up. But do not have a lecturing model. It should be a model of: “We’re in it together. Here’s what you can do. This is about caring for a part of Canberra that you love.”

Ms Ehmann: We are coming to the end of a project at the moment. We have set up a few demonstration verge gardens at people’s homes in the southern suburbs, and that has been enormously popular. We have done about 10, and there are also some in Belconnen. In Belconnen, it was about growing food on your verge. Then we had one that was water-wise—retaining water in the soil—and another that was very much focused on having native plants on your verge. People have been very interested in that. The neighbours of those households have also been interested. We have some plaques. That sort of demonstration model, accompanied with information, QR codes and all that sort of thing has been really successful for us. It could be extended to how to garden in the vicinity of a lake.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Lee.

MS LEE: I am conscious of time, and I see Ms Carrick here. My question was about invasive weeds and I think we have covered that sufficiently.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Carrick.

MS CARRICK: Following up on Yarralumla Creek, has the ACT government had conversations with you about the potential for a plan for the naturalisation of the creek?

Dr Copland: No. We are pushing for that. There needs to be more work done. We were disappointed that the government dropped plans around Sullivans Creek. We are disappointed that, in the context of the storm damage that happened at Yarralumla Creek and the history of Yarralumla Creek, with the risks of it, we are not having these active conversations. The closest I have come to is that I presented at the Woden Valley Community Council, and there was an ACT government representative, but they are not looking at doing re-naturalisation at this point in time at that creek.

MS CARRICK: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: 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*. Thank you for your time.

Dr Copland: Thank you very much.

Short suspension

FANNING, MS KATRINA, Secretariat Team Member, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body

THE CHAIR: We welcome the witness from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. Please note that, as a witness, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth, as giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. My first question is around the handover of the Boomanulla Oval and the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm. I want to find out from you whether any progress has been made on that front, and what you are hearing from the government. What is the timeline? It has been 11 years.

Ms Fanning: Yes, and being a rugby league fanatic, I am very well aware of how long it has been, with respect to the oval. It is important for me to start with acknowledgement of country. I am sure you have done that in your proceedings, but, from a personal point of view, I want to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the leadership of their elders, both past and present, and the support I have been privileged enough to receive over the last 30 or so years that I have called Canberra home. I want to acknowledge and be conscious of the fact that Elected Body members could not join me this morning.

With the Bush Healing Farm, as I understand it, a procurement process has been completed for the next stage of some service delivery out there, and a local community organisation has been successful in that process. Announcements around that are imminent. As I understand it, and from the advice that has been given to the Elected Body, that will be a phased approach and it will lean in to community design, for the next stage of programs at the Bush Healing Farm. It will be run more from an ACCO perspective than from the perspective of a government service provider that procures things. The Elected Body is comfortable with that process.

We have also started a joint process with two of the directorates, finalising the expression of interest for a joint management committee for Boomanulla Oval. That will be co-chaired by a representative of the Aboriginal community. It will have a Ngunnawal-specific allocated spot and an Elected Body spot. My understanding is that there will be seats for six community members, and a similar allocation for government. I understand that the announcement for that group will be made next week, with a 12-month window for working together, for the full transition to community control.

THE CHAIR: Will the six members each from community and government work on the transition?

Ms Fanning: It will do two things. It will take over operational decisions—for example, the type of activities that can be run there, and some of the policies. For example, similar mainstream sport and rec facilities might be able to have events that have alcohol licensing. They would jointly decide whether people think that is appropriate for activities at the oval, as an example.

Some of their remit will be on the operational side, over the 12 months, and in being able to decide things like that, as well as working on the business case, the ACCO type of structure, going forward, and the financial viability of a model for transition, so that it is set up for success at that full transition point.

THE CHAIR: This seems to have been happening for 11 years, and we are just setting up for a successful transition. It has been 11 years in the making. How is it that the government is just talking about setting up for transition in the next couple of years?

Ms Fanning: That is probably better—

THE CHAIR: For the government, yes.

Ms Fanning: My involvement with the Elected Body has been, firstly, as a previous chairperson, to restore the oval to functionality, for use, because it had been shut for a period of time. That has been the first stage. The second stage has been its current operating model. If you look back through the reports of hearings over that period of time, you will note that the Elected Body and the community have been asking for those things. What I can say is that the Elected Body is now part of those decisions and is actively involved in where things are up to now.

THE CHAIR: I have a question on bookings for the Boomanulla Oval. Does that still sit with the ACT government or is that part of what is transitioning?

Ms Fanning: It will be up to that joint committee to decide how that will work. Certainly, there will also be an increased presence of the Elected Body, both secretariat and members, given there are some increased hours for them, and they will have in their admin area someone at Boomanulla pretty much from Monday to Friday, so that the community can come and access the facility, rather than having to go through an online booking system. I know that will contribute to that, but how those bookings will be done will be a decision for that joint committee.

MR PARTON: Ms Fanning, you indicated that questions about how long this process has taken are really for government to answer, but can I ask this: as a leading member of the community, and as someone who is now front and centre in doing whatever you can to make this happen, do you have a level of frustration and, more broadly speaking, does the community have a level of frustration, that there has been a lot of talk about arriving at a transition for both the Bush Healing Farm and Boomanulla Oval to Aboriginal community control? Do they have frustration that it has taken so long and that we are not quite off the ground yet?

Ms Fanning: There are two parts to that answer. I think the greater level of frustration was that the asset was closed for a period of time. Some of that has been alleviated over the last few years with the ability to use it, bringing back family day to it, our sports carnivals, and the ability of organisations to use it. For some in our community, that was the first big hurdle.

Notwithstanding that, it is absolutely the case that we want it to be operated under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, but we also want it done in such a way that the organisation can thrive and does not have to struggle in the way that the old corporation for sport and recreation activity had to, in the transfer to self-government, and in the changes to commonwealth funding from deaths in custody money. We are very mindful that, whilst it was open, with the way that our community organisation was structured before, it was not sustainable and it limited the optimisation and utilisation of it.

The commitment from community is that we have been patient, and we want to make sure that when it transitions, it is as successful as it can be, and they will be patient, knowing that that is the work that will be done, rather than saying, “Over to you, but you’ve got to work it all out yourself.”

MR PARTON: A solid answer; thank you.

MR EMERSON: Ms Fanning, there is funding in the budget to increase the support for the secretariat of the Elected Body. Are you able to clarify what amount that is, and what exactly it is for?

Ms Fanning: There are a couple of elements, so I can understand what that looks like. The thing that I am most comfortable with is an uplift of hours for the members themselves, and there is money for the secretariat, to support that, and I will get to that. We have received funding that will lead to a more than doubling of the amount of time—and, for some members, triple the amount of time—they can spend on doing Elected Body business.

Some part of that is specific to the Jumbunna review. Four members will have an extra day a week specifically for that work. But most members will now have twice the time to work with community, as well as government, to fulfil their role. For me, that is quite substantial. I think that gets to about a 420K allocation for members’ time.

For the secretariat, it is almost a doubling, or a little less, of our time, which means we go from about 2½ people to just over 4½ people equivalence to be able to service all the needs of the members. Given that their time has doubled, helping to brief and record those things means that they mirror each other.

There is also some funding that is not specific to the secretariat. Our organisation will administer independent justice advisers under Jumbunna that will work closely with the Elected Body but independent of it, so that community have that opportunity, and it is not just the Elected Body’s view. They will work closely, particularly, with the ACCOs who work in the justice space and have contact around those recommendations. They are the three elements of that, as I understand it.

MR EMERSON: That makes sense. With the increased funding for members, is that per diem? Do you know whether that is allocated in a per diem way? Their base rates—this is something I wanted to ask you about—are quite low. I was looking at it in comparison with the City Renewal Authority Board. That chair is paid \$86,000 a year. The Chair of the Elected Body is paid \$37,000 a year—more than twice as much for the CRA. It goes that way for the Deputy Chair of the CRA Board, who is on

almost \$67,000 a year; the Deputy Chair of the Elected Body is on almost \$30,000. These are pretty significant gaps.

Ms Fanning: Yes.

MR EMERSON: It is less than \$20,000 for a member of the Elected Body who is not in one of those positions. The question is whether that base rate should be increased in an ongoing way.

Ms Fanning: There are two parts to the answer. With the uplift in hours, if you see that amount as their one-day-a-week rate, if they go to three days a week, it will be three times that amount.

MR EMERSON: Sure.

Ms Fanning: But the base rate has not changed. We will need to take a case to the Remuneration Tribunal for that. The last time this was looked at by the Remuneration Tribunal, there was a very significant difference in how the roles of the Elected Body were playing out. We will go back to the Remuneration Tribunal with that information as well, to have those base rates looked at. As you said, it is about comparing apples with apples, having regard to some of the other responsibilities, given what is now in agreements and action plans, and the work that is happening.

MR EMERSON: The Remuneration Tribunal Act allows for the Chief Minister to issue an instrument essentially requiring an inquiry into remuneration in a particular area. It recently did this for the Reconciliation Council, where the roles in the council have not been remunerated. Do you have any concerns that that has not happened for the Elected Body?

Ms Fanning: To be honest, it is not something that I was as literate in.

MR EMERSON: Me neither, until it was done for the Reconciliation Council.

Ms Fanning: It is not something that we have asked for and have had knocked back, to be fair. It is something that we would look at now, given the place we are at in the cycle for the Elected Body. This time next year, they will be going to their next lot of elections. We will, over the next period of time, be working with the right parts of government on this question: in going to those elections, what are the remuneration, the responsibilities and those sorts of things? Hopefully, we can attract as broad a candidate field as we can, and have those locked in, so that they know what they are signing up for.

MR EMERSON: This increasing role that we are seeing for the Elected Body is fantastic. It is a sign of the institution being valued and used in the way that was intended. The Elected Body act specifies that members should be engaged in a part-time capacity. Do you think it is time to look at whether all members, or the chair and deputy chair, should be in full-time roles, and amending the act to that effect?

Ms Fanning: The government have been proactive in coming to us post this uplift, and on some of the other structural changes that have occurred over the last period of

time, and have already asked for our advice on what potential legislative changes could be considered for the Elected Body, so that those things could be considered in the right processes ahead of next year's election. Certainly, they have started those discussions. We have started, with the members, talking about that. We have a community consultation scheduled for 14 July. We will ask those questions of community as well, and we will build on the work that Craig Ritchie did last year, with respect to what the community want to see from the Elected Body.

Certainly, that is something that members have raised, and I am sure it will be part of the advice they ask us to provide about getting those roles to be more full time. That would, as you rightly point out, require a legislative change. I am sure that will be part of the submission that we make.

MR BRADDOCK: I have some questions about the government's implementation of the Jumbunna report recommendations. What are your views of the government's response to that report? Are they working with you in terms of how they are looking to implement those recommendations?

Ms Fanning: Normally, from the outside, I would say that I am not as confident, except that what they have done is to wait to do the recommendations in partnership with us. The funding that the Attorney-General announced a few months ago—and the arrangements kicked in from two days ago—for us to do that uplift within the secretariat will see us partner in how that work is done and what the recommendations and implementation look like.

Given that we have only just got to the starting gate, we have only done a bit of prep work. But I am very confident that they are approaching this with a partnership lens. That has not been done before. I am sure that, as with all partnerships, we will have some moments. I am far more confident that, again, the shared decision-making principles of priority reform 1 of the national agreement and the need for transformative change from priority reform 3 are front and centre of that. My understanding is that the make-up of the funding is much more about empowering us to be resourced to lead, in a lot of ways, in that connection with community, as well as—probably for the first time, in my memory—resourcing the community-controlled organisations who we expect to participate to receive funding for that participation.

MR BRADDOCK: What are the key recommendations from that report that you think government should be moving on immediately to make the biggest change for your community?

Ms Fanning: In some ways, my personal opinion, given that I am here on behalf of the Elected Body, is a little less relevant. I need to be mindful that our cultural governance would mean that that is a decision for them, in a lot of ways. Certainly, the things that are harder to measure quickly are structural and systemic. I think there is a blend between the cultural transformation work, whole-of-government-wide, as well as the things specific to Jumbunna that cannot be done separately.

Sometimes, in Aboriginal affairs in this country—not just in this jurisdiction—we end up with people running in different directions, depending on which report they are looking at, and we do not join those things together. Over the last couple of months, it

has been about working with the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs on a process of making sure that all those things do make sense together.

One of the issues is that it might be the same recommendation, but it is described in four different ways, and we end up with different approaches. We have been helping with the work, to bring that to a point where we can say, “Here are the key actions,” and helping people to know, “This will help with Jumbunna recommendations. This will help with Productivity Commission recommendations. This helps with the phase 3 action plans,” rather than having lots of different activities that centre around that.

That work is progressing well. We have done it across two significant directorates in draft form that will go for approval to the subcommittee of cabinet that has been established. I am very confident in that process. I have already seen a difference in our director-general meetings and in meetings with senior officers when it comes to their awareness and understanding of what the commitments actually are and how to do something within their roles, particularly for people who might not have Indigenous-specific programming. It is about having the ability to work together and make sure that our assumptions are consistent with each other’s, as well as the activities.

Also, particularly in that Jumbunna space, we need to make sure that we are inclusive of our community-controlled organisations who have played a very large role—particularly in the justice space, and particularly people like Julie Tongs at Winnunga—and making sure that the things they have been doing and working for are represented and brought forward in those things.

Unfortunately, with a lot of this, it is not about re-creating the wheel. They are things we have known, between all of us, for some time. It is just that, within large systems of government, it is about how we do that structural change for impact, rather than the really small types of projects, or set-to-the-side specific projects, rather than across the mainstream service delivery, when it comes to how we make significant change.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a follow-up question about the budget commitment for the truth-telling process. Do you have any expectations in terms of how that process is undertaken to ensure that it is led by First Nations peoples and that it will actually lead to some form of action instead of just listening?

Ms Fanning: Yes.

MR BRADDOCK: Which is valuable in itself, I would say, too.

Ms Fanning: That one has been a little bit less in front of the Elected Body, given the need to ensure the Ngunnawal voice within the historic truth-telling. I would point to the focus area in the agreement that is lifelong learning, because that is what that is actually about. I think truth-telling points to the easiest way for most of our citizens to understand what systemic discrimination is. For many of us, if you are my age or above—I will not point to anyone across the table who I think that relates to—

MR PARTON: Just be careful!

Ms Fanning: We were all discriminated against, when it comes to what we were not taught in schools about the beauty of this place, the thousands of years of knowledge that we do not use, and those sorts of things. I think that is already embedded into action plans and agreements. Some progress has been made. I would be hesitant to talk more on the truth-telling process without a clearer direction from traditional owners on their preference in that space.

MR BRADDOCK: Okay; thank you.

MR PARTON: Can I continue briefly on that line of questioning? In regard to the Elected Body's role in implementation of the recommendations of the Jumbunna report, you have suggested a level of optimism about the seemingly collaborative partnership process which at least appears to be playing out. What level of optimism do you have that, at the end of this process, a large number of the important recs will actually be implemented?

Ms Fanning: It is as optimistic as I have been in my 30-year working career. The legislation changes that came into effect this week, particularly at that senior level, are requiring a focus from everybody, not just the people we happen to get in front of, on a weekly basis. There is the broader understanding for people about how it is a business imperative for all the public service, not just something that is good to do if you get the opportunity. It is that level of structural change, and the work that is about to commence on having a look at proportional funding and how that plays out. I am seeing the structural and system changes that we need that will give us longer term outcomes and, ironically, hopefully, it will reduce the need for specialised programs and funding, because the parity of outcomes has been achieved and it becomes—

MR PARTON: It becomes mainstream.

Ms Fanning: less necessary, because of the success. That is right.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: I have a question about the funding that has been provided to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise in responding to the Jumbunna review. What would be the best way of using that funding? What are the outcomes that you think will be most important? Actually, what are the processes that will be most important in that response? I do not want to prescribe outcomes.

Ms Fanning: For me, it is about reflecting the resourcing that it takes from community-controlled organisations to participate in this. Most of them are service delivery organisations. If they have someone coming to a Jumbunna review committee meeting, for example, that is a resource that is not at the front line for someone who is coming in to see a doctor, or to get family support or legal advice.

One of the tenets of priority reform 1 is to make sure that when we do shared decision-making, for resourcing, which is never going to be dollar for dollar, there is some support to allow for that cost to the community organisations to participate. There are several of our organisations that have been doing this for decades, at their own cost, because it is important and they understand that that will return a benefit to the community. This is about trying to reflect and value that expertise and the time that it will take; that is my understanding.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: That is really helpful; thank you.

MS CARRICK: I have one question. We have just had the school resourcing review, which was somewhat scathing, like many reviews, and Jumbunna. My question is about education. What do you think are the key actions for education for the Indigenous community, given that the recent resourcing review was scathing across the whole spectrum?

Ms Fanning: Whilst the review was scathing, I think the opportunity with the approach of what to centralise, and how to get some consistency across those things, helps us to identify and address systemic issues in a way that has not been possible with how perhaps the school system has been run, to be able to see and assess trends in attendance and outcomes, to help to have a greater lens of truth-telling in the curriculum, and those elements.

We have, within the resourcing, allocated an extra day to our education portfolio holder, Member Booth, for those dozen or so recommendations that are specific to education. With respect to the relationship with and engagement from Education, not just on the Jumbunna review or the phase 3 action plans, but on their response to those reviews, it has not just been at the end, to tell us that something has not worked, but all along the way. The approach of the current director-general has been to provide an update to the member regularly, not just in the in-person meetings but by saying, “These are the things I’m supposed to be delivering.” It has been probably the most proactive and transparent approach that we have seen from that directorate.

With respect to an area that is of the greatest need for us, given that almost half our population is under 24, and with the Early Childhood Development Index being where it is at, and with Closing the Gap telling us that if we get our people through to tertiary education, there is no gap, they have taken that seriously. They are working really hard with us on that level of engagement. They have a commitment in this budget around a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative group on education, to feed into that. That will link with the Elected Body as well, and that will play out in the same way as many of the education consultative groups around the country.

They have made substantial steps to share that decision-making, to be transparent as to where the issues are, and to work with us on what the opportunities are. I understand that they have also approached a number of the ACCOs for formal partnerships that will support that work.

MS CARRICK: They have not yet implemented the tiered support across the board. Do you have any views about how they should implement that, with the Indigenous community in mind? Is it just mainstreamed or is there anything that the Indigenous community requires in order to help to close the gap?

Ms Fanning: I feel like I am giving a bit of an each-way answer to you. When we say “mainstreamed”, we need to change what that means. “Mainstream” does not mean “devoid of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”. It means that the strength of that is shared by everybody, and I think that is part of the process. I think

that the interventions, the processes or the services that happen outside that are where we are trying to get an accelerated outcome or where there is an intensive need for a more holistic approach to, say, a family group across a number of services.

The work is around making sure that the strength and the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reflected as much in schools that do not have an Aboriginal student as they are in schools that have the most Aboriginal students. That is something on which this review creates an opportunity. I think it is one area where that can start to set the standard across other directorates, where maybe it is not as easy to see the line of sight to that opportunity.

It is about having the required level of partnership with our service providers who are skilled and who have relationships with community, and having the services that our children and young people need, in order to be successful in the education system—whether that is because they are also in contact with youth justice or out-of-home care, or any other type of need that they might have. That will still be required for some time. The conversations with those organisations in partnership on how that is delivered are important.

MR EMERSON: The City and Environment Directorate budget papers show that they have set a strategic indicator target for 100 per cent of senior executive service staff to have cultural integrity embedded in their performance agreements. Would you like to see every directorate do that?

Ms Fanning: That is probably a reflection of those commitments in phase 3 action plans being agreed ahead of the legislation that we now have. What I would like to see first is a whole-of-government standard on what we mean by cultural integrity. If we have seven versions of that in directorates, that is not helpful for us. I think there are some layers of community input, Elected Body oversight and traditional owner input, regarding what that might look like. Absolutely, there is nothing about cultural integrity that people should not see as part of how they do business. It is about understanding, in practical terms, how they can show that that is what they are doing. I am not familiar with that as a line item on its own.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any question on notice—I do not think that you have—please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you so much for your attendance today.

Ms Fanning: Thanks for the opportunity.

HARFORD, MR GREG, Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Business Chamber
MARSHALL, DR DAVID, Chair, Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum

THE CHAIR: I welcome witnesses from the Canberra Business Chamber and the Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth, as 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, I will now proceed to questions. My first question is to the Canberra Business Chamber. Your budget submission outlined a respectful request that the focus of this budget should be on holding all rates, fees and charges. I want to get your understanding of whether the budget matches that request.

Mr Harford: There were some good steps taken in the budget towards re-prioritising expenditure and trying to keep spending under control. Our concern is that the government's tax take, as a result of the budget we have seen, is still increasing by 10.1 per cent, year on year. That is at a time when the economy is growing at 3½ per cent and inflation in the year to April was 4.2 per cent. We are seeing a steady expansion of government spending, really, at the expense of the private sector.

Ultimately, that means more money is coming out of the economy and going into government. That impacts households' ability and willingness to spend, and it reduces the ability of businesses to invest. Of course, from a commercial rates point of view, we have seen an announcement of about an eight per cent average commercial rates rise in the next year. That is significantly above the inflationary position, and it is also significantly more than we are seeing across the border in New South Wales or down in Victoria. We do still have concerns about the direction of travel.

THE CHAIR: What potential dangers to businesses would this result in, if we continue on this trajectory?

Mr Harford: We have real concerns about the trajectory of travel for business here in the ACT. There are a lot of good things about doing business in the ACT, but it is a really expensive place to do business. Payroll tax is the other thing to mention, too. As a result of decisions announced in last year's budget, the threshold for payroll tax is coming down. That means more businesses will be paying payroll tax. We have the highest payroll tax rates in the country and, ultimately, a combination of all these factors creates a disincentive for businesses to invest and grow here in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: On payroll tax, we know that the government, as you said, has revised its estimated revenue that it would receive from payroll tax. In your view, is this proof of the impact that tax changes are having, or have had, on businesses? If the rate of revenue has come down, does it mean that businesses are feeling the pinch and, because of that, there are less businesses who are willing to invest in Canberra?

Mr Harford: Yes, absolutely. We have seen significant restructuring in the private sector over the last 12 to 18 months. We have seen a significant decline in private sector capital investment in the ACT. We are one of two states and territories where private sector capital investment is declining. That is not a good sign. Of course, it is

also true that we are a great jurisdiction for payroll tax, if you are a start-up business. You can go up to \$1.75 million worth of payroll without being impacted by payroll tax. But that incentive to grow is just not here. We punish you if you are bigger. Our top payroll tax is now 8.75 per cent. You have to be a very big company to be paying that level of payroll tax, admittedly. But the reality is that you could put your teams across the border in Queanbeyan and pay 5.4 per cent. You could have that team in regional Victoria and pay 1.13 per cent payroll tax. Having payroll tax at 8.75 per cent is just not an incentive to grow in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Based on your experience, what would be a better growth trajectory?

Mr Harford: We need to be incentivising businesses to grow, and we need to take away barriers to investment. We need to be looking at what the best settings are for payroll tax around the country. We need to be looking at how we can move towards replicating those. We are great at the bottom end, for start-ups; that is true. But other jurisdictions have significantly lower rates—four and five per cent, for most businesses. That would be much more equitable, and it would level the playing field.

The reality is that we operate in a very competitive environment. We are competing with other states, and we are also competing with offshoring. You can save money by shifting your people around Australia, but if you offshore some of those roles to the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore or New Zealand, there is no payroll tax at all, and that is the biggest strategic risk for Australia as a whole.

THE CHAIR: How real is that risk? We hear that people are saying, “We’ve got really good industrial laws, so businesses would stay.” How real is that risk?

Mr Harford: That is a real and genuine risk, and it is happening now. We surveyed our members about that earlier in the year. There are a number of firms in the ACT that are putting people offshore—both; in other states, as well as offshore—as a result of tax settings. It is much cheaper to employ people, and you can drive productivity improvements in your business, by shifting those roles elsewhere.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any data on that?

Mr Harford: I have some data which I do not have at my fingertips, but I can certainly come back to you on what we know about that.

THE CHAIR: That would be awesome; thank you.

MS LEE: Mr Harford, your evidence—not just here but in other inquiries—is clear: the tax burden in the ACT is incredibly challenging for businesses. I am not saying that that is not the reason, but, apart from tax, what should be the government’s priority to make it easier for businesses to thrive here?

Mr Harford: We think that the focus needs to be on economic growth. We have a budget that has really been designed, understandably, around delivering revenue for government, but it has not focused on growing the economy. We have had a very good run of economic growth over a very long period of time. I think this is our 29th year of consecutive economic growth, which is impressive, by any stretch of the

imagination. But we are not growing as fast as some other places, and the real question is: how do we maximise the opportunities that are here for businesses to grow, to grow their employment here in the ACT and, ultimately, deliver a better revenue base for the ACT government?

Payroll tax is one of them. Compliance requirements generally across the board are others. Commercial rates are an issue. There are a number of indicators which show that it is more expensive to do business in the ACT. And you see that from a consumer point of view as well. You can get a service here that might cost \$5,000 and in Queensland it might cost \$1,500. There are a range of challenges that flow through and that make it more expensive for everyone in the ACT, not just businesses.

MS LEE: Like liquor licensing; thank you.

Mr Harford: If I can add to that, the other concern that we consistently hear about is the availability of good talent in the ACT. We do have a well-educated and highly paid population. That is fantastic, but the private sector faces really strong competition from the commonwealth public service in particular, as well as the ACT public service, for talent. That does make it harder in some cases for businesses to grow, and we need places for those people to—

MR EMERSON: I want to ask about support for businesses impacted by light rail and other construction works in the city. Obviously, this is an ongoing issue. The government has included in the budget an announcement that it will continue to deliver an expanded version of the Canberra Business Advice and Support Service. Do you see this as sufficient? Do you support targeted financial relief, like means-tested rent relief, delivered perhaps through rates reductions, to businesses that are impacted by the ongoing works?

Mr Harford: I do not think it goes far enough; that is the short answer. The businesses that are impacted by light rail construction in some cases are facing deeply troubling situations. A bit of business advice does not help you to manage your cash flow, and it does not help you to pay your staff. We do think that a combination of things should be considered. One of those is direct financial support, potentially through rates relief or rent relief. Potentially, there could be some sort of government guarantee for bank loans, too, to some of these businesses. That might be something that could be considered.

Dr Marshall: I have a lot to say about this, because we have approached the government on a number of occasions. It is heartless, in not providing support to people impacted by light rail. It is quite easy to identify who they are. A lot of them are restaurants. A lot of them are in the hospitality industry. My recommendation initially was, “Why don’t we look at what government did, and did very well, for COVID?” Considering the cost of light rail, the percentage you would have to apply to provide support for these businesses is quite minimal.

It is heartbreaking. It is absolutely heartbreaking to see businesses who have spent a lifetime working their butt off and then, through no fault of their own, are faced with financial ruin, in some cases. A number of restaurants have closed, and they had to close. The traffic in Civic at the moment is down about 15 per cent—this is according

to CRA—and that is serious. One of the pubs in Civic is down 30 per cent in turnover, and up 30 per cent in costs. It is just not sustainable. This will go on for another 12 to 18 months, at least. It is a serious worry.

Businesses, however, are saying that, in the end, it will be beneficial. It is getting there which is the challenge for people. We speak to these people all the time. It really is quite stressful to hear. They are seriously suffering. I agree fully with what you are doing. We are all trying to help people.

With our leaders forum, we have 24 people around the table, and they are all involved in the visitor economy, driving the visitor economy, and representing about 50,000 Canberrans. We have a massive amount of influence and pull. I think it is critically important. We do not represent them; the people around the table do. Overarchingly, we are responsible for driving the visitor economy and helping them to do that.

Light rail is one issue. You mentioned relief for rates and taxes, and those sorts of things. A lot of the people who are leasing do not feel the impact of that, because the landlords will take it. But there are other ways of doing it, I think. It would be incredibly helpful if that were the case.

MR EMERSON: The government has—this is on a government website, published in 2022—a business partnership policy for ACT government major projects, which outlines how the ACT government may partner with nearby businesses during the construction phase of major projects to minimise disruption to the greatest extent possible. It has a list. It has to be an ACT government infrastructure project, not an emergency or critical repair project; there has to be significant disruption, extended duration of disruption, which is defined as for at least six months; and it has to be a major project. It has to be a big project. Are you aware of that policy? Have you heard of anyone accessing it?

Mr Harford: I am not aware of it, no.

Dr Marshall: The government, to their credit, have reduced licence fees, particularly for outdoor dining, and things like that. They have tried to do something. Also, if a restaurant, for example, has something else, like a live performance or a poetry reading, they will be given some relief, as far as their licence fees are concerned. But there have been very few people applying for it, mainly because restaurants tell me, “We’re not in the live music scene, and we don’t want people reading poetry. We’re serving food and we’re trying to give people an experience.”

MR EMERSON: Get out of here with your poetry!

Dr Marshall: Yes, that is right. It is a bit of a challenge. The government have been trying to find areas, but it is pretty obvious as to what is needed.

MR EMERSON: I was surprised to hear about the existence of this policy. You have both said you are in regular contact with a lot of business owners, and you have never heard of it. Have you ever heard of that specific policy?

Dr Marshall: Certainly, from a restaurant point of view, we have. With the AHA, we have been talking about it. But there are other issues that the hospitality sector are facing now, with the portable long service leave. The private sector has lobbied and lobbied against this. To their credit, the government have delayed its implementation. But it is just not the solution. Very few people work for more than two or three years in hospitality. You can ask restaurants; go to Such and Such, and they will tell you. There are so many restaurants around.

We agree with superannuation. We agree that people should be provided with that, if they stay for seven years. That is the law. But when you are only staying for one or two years, and most of the hospitality people are younger people, students, and they are studying law, medicine or whatever, they have no interest in a long-term career in hospitality. A few of them, potentially, do. But if they are going to stay on, they will get it. There has to be a way to do this. We understand that it is portable; so, if they are in hospitality for seven years, they should not miss out. I think it is being put through at probably the worst time you could possibly imagine for ACT hospitality people. And it is nowhere else in the country.

THE CHAIR: Referring to your stats, you mentioned businesses with a 30 per cent dip in revenue.

Dr Marshall: One.

THE CHAIR: Just one?

Dr Marshall: One, but it is quite reflective. They are saying, “We’re 30 per cent down and costs have gone up 30 per cent.”

THE CHAIR: Doesn’t that show that it is the government’s settings that are influencing them? If it is 30 per cent and 30 per cent, that is fine; that is quite even.

Dr Marshall: It is the footfall in Canberra. It is quite interesting. If you walk around Canberra on Friday and Saturday nights, often it is really buzzing. But it is about what happens on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. It is very uneven, and that is one of the challenges. There is the increase, as Greg said, in rates and taxes, and in all those other areas of costs, which the government could, if they wished, regulate in some shape or form, or reduce.

THE CHAIR: Have the levers to pull.

Dr Marshall: But it is causing pain. That is the bottom line.

MR BRADDOCK: With the noise standards for the entertainment precinct in Civic, is the lack of that causing an impact in terms of hospitality business here?

Dr Marshall: It has been an interesting journey. We spoke to CED, Dave Peffer and a whole lot of people about this situation. The Crystalbrook hotel will open in Garema Place next year, which will be absolutely sensational. It is an issue. We have seen a couple of businesses having to modify what they do in Braddon because of noise. It is a real challenge. We have every sympathy for people who are impacted, if they buy a

property and they then find that, after 10 o'clock, it is too noisy. There has to be a balance. A common-sense approach would be the way to look at it.

MR BRADDOCK: Do you think that has been achieved by the government process, or not?

Dr Marshall: I think they are trying. I definitely think they are trying. They are very well aware of it. Certainly, the Crystalbrook developers have been very conscious of it.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question for you, Mr Harford, in terms of the government's current approach to procurement and whether that is making the full use of skills and competencies of the small to medium enterprises that we have in Canberra. Do you have any views on whether they are successfully doing that, or whether they could do better?

Mr Harford: We could always do better. The concerns that I hear about, in the procurement space, are around businesses often not being asked to provide quotations or tenders. Some businesses are locked out of panels for quite long periods of time, and there is often not a rapid refresh process. I think that more can be done.

There has been an interesting announcement in the last couple of weeks from ACT government around procurement policy, to the effect that if you have a contract worth up to half-a-million dollars or a million dollars for construction, you no longer need to get competitive quotes for that. For some of our members, that will be very good news, because they will not face competition in the delivery of those services. It also means that some businesses may be locked out of being asked to quote.

There are some questions there about value for money for taxpayers as well, and how we make sure that we are not only getting the best and most agile small businesses delivering, as part of the government's procurement processes, but we know that that is being done at a cost-effective price.

MR BRADDOCK: What changes or strategies would you suggest for the ACT government to make sure they are leveraging that expertise?

Mr Harford: It is very much about making sure we are engaging with local businesses or businesses that are operating here, making sure that there are good opportunities for businesses to be part of panel refreshes, and making sure that a range of businesses are being asked to provide quotations on significant bits of work. I am not suggesting that we should be asking for 17 or 20 quotes on half-a-million dollars worth of work. I think that a minimum of two or three would be a very good, sensible step.

MR BRADDOCK: Have you been surprised by any government procurement methods or outcomes in the past 12 months?

Mr Harford: Not specifically.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: With the increase to \$2.1 million in the commercial stamp duty tax-free threshold, how has that landed initially amongst local businesses, and what would be the next steps in future budgets to build on this sort of work?

Mr Harford: Stamp duty is not a good tax. Payroll tax is not a good tax, either. There are many bad taxes, but stamp duty is not a good tax. Government has been trying to move away from relying on stamp duty over time, which we support. The more we can drive that forward, the better. I have not had too much specific feedback on that point over the last couple of weeks.

MS LEE: Dr Marshall, you have spent a lot of time talking publicly about the look and feel of the city. Mr Harford, you have, too. Can you provide a little bit more, in terms of the feedback that you are getting from your members, about the impact of the unkemptness, the lack of action on antisocial behaviour and the graffiti on business confidence and attracting visitors to the centre?

Dr Marshall: I would be delighted to.

MS LEE: I thought you might be!

Dr Marshall: There are a couple of things. Full marks to ACT Policing. They are running a consultative forum, if you like, every second month, and this has been discussed at length. Certainly, evidence from the Kanga Cup last year was that families were coming into Civic, they were seeing some of the antisocial behaviour, and homelessness. They got frightened; their kids were not comfortable.

Generally, it is the look. When you walk into the city centre and you see heavily graffitied buildings—there is one just across the road here—it is not a good look for the nation's capital. We have been pushing this. To the credit of CED and Dave Pepper, he is right onto this, and he realises the significance of it. When you are the nation's capital, image is critical. If you drive through, for example, regional New South Wales, some of those towns are beautiful—beautifully maintained, clean, tidy and so forth. We do have an issue here, and it definitely has an impact, again, mainly on business confidence, in some respects.

Having talked to a lot of businesspeople, particularly around the carousel, in the city area, their staff find it very concerning to leave a business later in the evening. Customers who have gone into a couple of the banks in that area to take out cash—and this is through the day—have asked staff, “Can you walk me back to my car?” This is anecdotal, but the City Renewal Authority did some research on this. I do not believe that Civic is dangerous. I think there is just a perception about safety. It is the perception which is the issue, I think, more than anything else.

The interesting thing is that, with the Kanga Cup this year, hotels are reporting to us that their bookings for the Kanga Cup are well down. I do not know why that is the case. We are going to find out the reason. It could be the state of the ovals. There are all these things going on, and it is very difficult to know. It could be the fact that fuel prices are deterring people from coming to Canberra. There are a whole array of things that are an issue.

MS LEE: You mentioned the City Renewal Authority having done some research. Do you have that research that you can table for the committee, so that we can have access to it?

Dr Marshall: We can certainly ask Craig Gillman. In fact, it is reasonably publicly available. Craig would be able to answer that question. I will check with Craig, anyway.

THE CHAIR: Are you taking that question on notice, to check?

Dr Marshall: I guess I am.

THE CHAIR: Just confirming it, for the record.

MR BRADDOCK: Please do.

Dr Marshall: That is a bad mistake!

Mr Harford: It was published in the *Canberra Times*, I believe.

Dr Marshall: Yes.

MS LEE: Sometimes it is important to have the source document and make sure that we are all on the same page.

Dr Marshall: Yes, okay.

MS LEE: Mr Harford, do you have something to add?

Mr Harford: No. I completely agree with David. I think the biggest issue is around the perceptions of safety rather than actual safety. But that perception can create challenges for customers, and that is a problem for businesses, in terms of getting customers into premises, particularly late at night, as well as during the day. It is also a problem for staff.

MS CARRICK: My question is around the town centres and business confidence in the town centres, and whether ACT government planning is enabling and encouraging business to thrive in the town centres. That is the first part. The second part is particularly around Molonglo and the new town centre there, and whether the planning is encouraging a precinct for commercial areas. We know that jobs are lacking in Gungahlin. Will we see business confidence and jobs in Molonglo?

Mr Harford: The biggest challenge for businesses in the town centres, including Molonglo, is around consumer demand. It is great that we have a planning system that says we are going to have these areas for commercial and retail development, but the reality is that if we do not have customers wanting to go out and spend in those commercial precincts, they will not thrive.

We see all over the city—most famously, perhaps, down in Richardson, and indeed in Monash—commercial shopping precincts that have withered away because customers

are not keen to get out and support those local businesses. That is a tragedy, I would argue, for those businesses, as well as for the local communities. But we are in a world where it is convenient and easy to jump in your car and hop down to Coles and Woolworths, and that is what many customers choose to do, rather than visit their local shops.

MS CARRICK: On Molonglo, specifically, the Molonglo Community Forum is very concerned about how planning will progress there. Do you think there is a role for the ACT government to ensure that the planning enables commercial sites?

Mr Harford: Absolutely, I think it is important that there is provision for commercial sites and that it should be encouraged.

MS CARRICK: Presumably, it has to be planned so that it is attractive, so that people want to go there?

Mr Harford: That is right. You need the physical environments to be such that people are keen to go there. But you also need consumers to feel confident enough, secure enough and financially robust enough to be able to get out and support those local businesses. Notwithstanding the fact that the ACT does have relatively high average wages across the board—the highest in the country, I believe—the reality is that there are lots of consumers out there at the moment who are feeling particularly stressed, as a result of interest rates, increased residential rates or increased rents. There are a whole lot of factors. We have a cost-of-business crisis; we have a cost-of-living crisis, too. That is part of the challenge for small businesses.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, we thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you so much for your time today. The committee will now suspend the proceedings for a break.

Hearing suspended from 10.46 to 11.01 am.

BOWLES, DR DEVIN, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Council of Social Service

DOBSON, MS CORINNE, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Shelter

PRIERGAARD, MR JACOB, Senior Policy Adviser, ACT Council of Social Service

SANDILANDS, MS JENNY, Head of Policy, ACT Council of Social Service

WENSING, DR ED, Honorary Secretary, ACT Shelter

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings of the Select Committee on Estimates 2026-2027. We welcome witnesses from the ACT Council of Social Service. I note that ACT Shelter is supposed to be appearing as well but have not yet arrived. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. My first question is around effectiveness generally. Aside from funding levels, what are the biggest barriers preventing community organisations from delivering better outcomes for Canberra? I know funding is a big one—and there will be questions around that—but I wanted to kick off with that question just to set the scene, for me especially.

Dr Bowles: I think it is important to acknowledge that we are, in a national and global context, a period of fairly rapid change economically and socially. Economically, we are seeing the gap between the wealthiest and the least well-off accelerating in its expansion and socially this is leading to increased levels of discontent in the community. What this means is that there are more people who require the essential services that are delivered by the community sector—and that runs to a really wide range of things. So, because of economic shifts, there are more people, including people who are employed full time, who are requiring assistance like food pantries. At the same time, pressures are leading more people to poorer mental health and so there are more requiring community-based mental health supports. I can tell a similar story around domestic and family violence and any number of other things, whether it is housing or other things.

What that means is that the number of people coming to the sector is increasing, and that requires scaling up existing services. It also means that people who are attending community services in need of help often have more complex needs than there would have been a few years ago. In some cases, you are getting families that did not require any essential services coming and needing a food pantry. In other cases, you are engaging with a family that had maybe one touchpoint previously but, because of additional pressures, now requires assistance on a number of other fronts. When you are working with a family, that means that you need to be collaborating more. Having the infrastructure to ensure that all of a person's needs are being met is important. That means connections between community service providers but also connections between those providers and government that provide complementary services.

THE CHAIR: On the increase in pressure, especially on food pantries, do you have the latest stats on what the increase is? Do you have any idea of how that has increased over the last two to five years?

Mr Priergaard: I do not have it for over the last two to five years. Volunteering ACT have said that there has been an increase of between 25 per cent and 75 per cent in the last 12 months, depending on the particular food pantry. That was their latest figure.

THE CHAIR: That is a significant increase in the last 12 months. On service delivery itself and the community sector's capacity to do that, do you think that the government has essentially added an additional burden on the sector through policy and process? Do you think that has contributed in any way to the increase in the burden on the sector and then the decrease in the capacity to provide services?

Dr Bowles: There are a number of important aspects to the relationship between the community sector and government. The way I view it is that the community sector and government are long-term partners in delivering essential services to the community. One of the historic impediments to efficiency has been short-term contracts and short notice about whether those contracts are being renewed. The government has taken important steps in this budget to have longer contracts, and we applaud that.

I think a wider question is: at what point in a person's life does the overall service system—meaning both the community sector and government—choose to intervene? It is always tempting for a government to wait until something gets to crisis. Crisis services are really visible. It is easy to see and to measure their impact, because people's lives are hanging in the balance. But that is an inefficient use of resources, in that, often if you intervene earlier in someone's path to a crisis, you can do so more cheaply and in a way that keeps that person's life sort of on track so that they are contributing to the community in the way that they would want. What we saw in this budget was a general shift towards more upstream investment in the community sector. We think, overall, that is helpful. We think there is absolutely more to be done in that space, and we look forward to continuing to engage with government about that.

The last couple of years has seen a maturation in the relationship between government and the community sector. I think governments around the world struggle to get the best information on the needs and wants of people experiencing poverty and who are otherwise disadvantaged. The community sector in the ACT and many other jurisdictions is often the best source of intelligence for government on that. Working with government, I think we are enhancing our ability to get the right information at the right time to the right people for government budget decision-makers. There is more work to be done there, but it has been great to see the government and the community sector adjusting practice to better informed decision-making.

THE CHAIR: Just before we continue, I would like to welcome representatives from ACT Shelter. For the *Hansard* record, could you please state your name and the capacity in which you will appear?

Dr Wensing: Dr Ed Wensing, honorary secretary of ACT Shelter.

Ms Dobson: Corinne Dobson, CEO of ACT Shelter.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. 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. I had a question for you, but I will come back to you, because you have just arrived. I will hand to Mr Emerson.

MR EMERSON: Thank you. ACTCOSS, your budget media released raises the lack of disability investment in the budget. I want to ask about your sense of the level of anxiety across the community sector around the NDIS reforms and what that means for people in the ACT with disability?

Dr Bowles: I think the level of anxiety in the sector is pretty high. This is a monumental reform that is going to happen, with a substantial shift of responsibility for providing care to people with disabilities from the NDIA to state and territory governments. We are hearing that this transition is happening just a few months from now, and I think there is a feeling that there is not enough information about what supports are going to be in place when that transition happens and also what role the community sector will play in providing those supports.

Before the NDIS was created, the community sector played a really important role in providing supports to people with disabilities. In the ACT community sector I got my start providing care to kids with disabilities. It looks like some of that support may be shifting again. There are real questions about how much of that is going to be shifting to the sector and what framework that is. I think much of the sector is watching the clock pretty closely and counting down the days, knowing how much work there is to prepare to support people adequately.

MR EMERSON: Do you have a sense from the sector of not only their preparedness but also the government's preparedness to deliver Thriving Kids in the near term and Foundational Supports thereafter?

Dr Bowles: I think it is fair to say that those discussions are not as advanced as would ideally be the case. In fairness to the ACT government, the transition time announced by the federal government is not hugely long. I would say that as a system we really need to get our skates on. For a long time, the community sector has provided a lot of those essential supports. Unfortunately, over the last period since the NDIS has been created, some capacity within the community sector has been diminished, but a lot of the expertise and certainly the passion remains. The community sector is eager to work with government to make sure that people are getting the supports they need.

MR EMERSON: Thank you. I have one more on this line—and it might be one for ACT Shelter from a housing perspective as well. I am curious to know what is not funded or funded sufficiently in this budget for people with disability.

Dr Bowles: One thing that we note is that there is not a lot of money for inclusive education. There does not seem to be any new money for loadings, learning support assistance or the inclusive education strategy. With housing, there was a lot of new investment but, at this point, there is not clarity about how much of that is going to go into making social housing stock more accessible to people with disabilities. There is not a disability housing strategy. In regard to my earlier comment about how much of

the new funding is going to go to making sure people with disabilities can be supported in public housing, I was specifically referring to maintenance and that additional funding. I think there is a strategy around the disability delivery overall. Some of the first action plan commitments appear to be stalled or their progress is unclear. This includes the neurodiversity strategy—which appears to be unfunded and unstarted—and a disability liaison officer at Access Canberra, where there is not a funded position. So there are some gaps that the government could address.

MR EMERSON: Anything to add, Ms Dobson?

Ms Dobson: Yes. We heard with the inquiry into specialist disability accommodation that there are some real gaps there in public housing. Of course, there are repairs and maintenance but there is the broader issue of having housing that is appropriate and accessible to the broad range of people who are in public housing who, disproportionately, live with disability. Some have the NDIS funding and some do not. We have also seen some other ways in which the shortfall for funding does impact on housing outcomes and homelessness.

I believe one space where we see there is a big gap is the support for people with psychosocial support needs. That has been demonstrated, where some do get support under the NDIS but many do not in the ACT. We have not really seen any movement on that for some time, despite the report that was released, I think, the year before last, that showed there was a large level of unmet need. We continue to see among our homeless population disproportionately high rates of people who have mental health issues—higher than in other jurisdictions. That is also something. I think a lack of those support services for people who have complex needs does contribute to poorer outcomes and homelessness as well. The lack of funding support around disability—and I include psychosocial disability within that—does have broader ramifications for the service system.

MS CARRICK: My question is about specialist schools and investment in them. I know there are different views in the community about whether or not we should have specialist schools, but many parents choose to send their children there. They have been closed for COVID, for coloured sand and for flooding, and there appears to be a lack of investment in them. We have not had a new one for something like 50 years. I wanted to get your views about investment in the budget for specialist schools.

Dr Bowles: I regret to say that we do not have a formed position on that topic—apologies.

MS CARRICK: No worries. Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question about your *Cost of living report*, which highlighted that, as of 31 March, there were over 3,551 applicants on the ACT housing waitlist with a 10 per cent increase from previous years and an average wait time of five years for standard housing, three years for high needs and five months for priority. I am trying to understand what the consequences are of these deficits in public housing, what is driving them and what action is required to address that.

Ms Sandilands: I suspect Shelter probably has something to say on this as well, but I am happy to respond initially given the cost-of-living context within our report. Essentially, the problem with public housing is the imbalance between supply and demand. That is why there are these huge waiting lists. One of the causes for that, I think, is the lack of supply of inexpensive private rentals. The latest Anglicare “Rental Affordability Snapshot” found that no rental properties in the ACT are affordable for anyone on social security payments and there was only one affordable property in the ACT for a single person on a minimum wage. What happens when people on low incomes are forced out of a high private rental market is that their remaining option is social housing. That is what leads to these pressures on the waiting times, which, yes, have grown over time. In 2021, there were about 2,500 approved applicants on the public housing waiting list, while in March this year there were more than 3,500. So, essentially, we need more investment in public housing. You asked about the consequences there. Each person that is on the waitlist is either homeless or about to be, and that has really negative downstream consequences for social, economic and health costs for those individuals and as well as for our community.

MR BRADDOCK: So our economic adviser analysis showed there had been no significant uplift in investment in public housing since, I believe, 2011. You set a target of 10 per cent for housing stock to be public housing. Does that match your experience—that there has not been a sufficient investment to be able to maintain that level of percentage? What is the current percentage that the government has?

Ms Sandilands: In our last budget submission, we recommended to restore social housing to at least 10 per cent of all housing stock by 2036. The current stock in the ACT is 6.5 per cent and that has been—

Ms Dobson: It is 5.48 per cent for public housing.

Ms Sandilands: Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: Sorry, so just to confirm: 5.48 per cent for public and then—

Ms Dobson: Yes, 5.48 per cent for public housing. For social housing, it is a little bit unclear, because we do not have clear-cut statistics on community housing and the proportion of social housing.

MR BRADDOCK: Okay.

Ms Sandilands: So it is even worse, I guess, given the latest figures that Corinne quoted there. That is down from 7.6 per cent a decade ago and 12.2 per cent from self-government. So I think that you can see that is a really steep decline. I think that is the same picture nationally but, for the ACT as a jurisdiction, that is one of the steepest declines that we have seen. We know that that decline is not simply due to just the strong growth in private supply, because the number of social housing per Canberra have fallen—falling from around 32 dwellings per 1,000 Canberrans in 2010 to less than 26 last year.

MR BRADDOCK: Okay.

Dr Bowles: Just as context, it is really clear that the private housing market works well for a lot of Canberrans, but it does not work for a substantial fraction. Previously, when we had more social housing stock, the fact that the private housing market did not work for everyone was okay. In that time, the private housing market has become even worse for many people and, at the same time, social housing stock has declined. Our position is that we need, as a community, to accept that the right housing mix includes at least 10 per cent social housing stock, because the private market is so far from being able to meet the needs. The figures from the Anglicare report that Ms Sandilands quoted earlier are, I think, a pretty stark demonstration of how far the private market is from being able to meet people's needs.

MR BRADDOCK: Ms Dobson, I would like to invite you into the conversation, but I am also interested in whether the additional funding that was provided to ACT Shelter was sufficient or not or what that might contribute to in addressing the—

Ms Dobson: I would probably just go to the core issue for us, which is public housing. We went back a bit further. If we look at 1993, the dwellings per capita was 41.2. If we look to 2025, it is 22.9. That is a very substantial drop—as per the statistics we spoke about in terms of the proportion of all dwellings. We have been on a steady decline, basically. In this budget, we really do welcome the investment that we have seen in public housing. It is the most significant investment we have seen in years—and I think that is something to be recognised—but it does not actually reverse that decline. Even if the government meet their targets, we will continue to see public housing shrink as a proportion of overall housing.

One of the issues that we talk about in the private rental market is that rents have increased far more than incomes. We have the highest rates of rental stress, with people receiving commonwealth rental assistance in the ACT. So, clearly, the private rental market is not an option for a proportion of people on low incomes. But we are just not seeing social housing growing to meet the need. This is a fundamental challenge for government. We think this budget was a positive step, but it is just not going anywhere near the scale of the challenge that we are facing. There are also some issues around repairs and maintenance that we are also happy to talk about.

In relation to the funding for ACT Shelter, it certainly was welcome to have that funding to ensure that we can actually continue as the peak body for housing and homelessness in the ACT. It still is a very modest amount of funding. Given the scope of work and the scope of issues that we cover, it is always going to be a challenge for us. But we certainly welcome that funding that was announced in the budget.

MR BRADDOCK: Ms Dobson, I would just take you back a little bit. So, despite the ACT having lower than average rent increases across Australia due to the fact we have those rental caps, we are still experiencing the highest level of housing stress due to rent increases. Is that correct?

Ms Dobson: I would not say we have the highest level of rental stress in Australia. Canberra, if we look at median incomes, is higher than what we see elsewhere. But we need to be very careful when we just look at median or averages, because that really masks the distribution. We also do not have a broad range of rents; it is a fairly narrow span. That means that, if you are on a low income, there really are not those

options in the private rental market. Although we certainly have seen rents stabilise in the ACT and they have not increased at the pace we see elsewhere, it is still coming off a very high base. That is why, as I said, for those who receive commonwealth rental assistance—people who are on lower incomes—it really is a very, very challenging rental market.

Dr Wensing: I would just add a point. It is also on the demographics of the household. Families have a better chance of getting a rental, rather than a single parent or a group of young people. So there is a complex range of issues in there. We do not have that flexibility of the stock at the lower end of the market that some of the other bigger cities have. That is what is missing here.

MR BRADDOCK: Just to make sure I understand: the other point was that, despite the ACT government's increased investment in housing, that is not sufficient to keep up with the rate of housing required to meet our expanding population. Is that correct?

Ms Dobson: That is correct. We spoke about the public housing waiting lists. Previously it had 3,500 people on it, which is not necessarily representing all the people who may actually need public housing, because not everyone gets onto the waiting list. But, taking that waiting list as a benchmark, this this budget will deliver 450 additional homes. Again, every additional public home makes a difference—we know that—but it is not going to meet the level of need that we are seeing, and we do not see that level of need dropping off given the conditions in the housing market, despite some of the other issues around home ownership and so on. In the rental market, we do not see that that those pressures are going to ease off, particularly for those on lower incomes.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: The Housing Crisis Support Fund and crisis support payments have been established in the budget. What would be the next steps in a future budget? These provide a certain level of assistance which will be used as best it can, presumably, but what would be the next steps? What should the government be looking to build on going forward within crisis support perhaps or in another area, in terms of joined up thinking or a plan to try and spread it out as much as possible and as effectively as possible?

Ms Dobson: Previously, the Crisis Support Fund worked in a very good way in the sense that a lot of the support services would refer to it. Care Financial did have financial counselling support for renters. It does not solve the issues if someone does not have enough income and there are there are challenges there that are structural, but it can mean that they can look at other ways, other options or other programs or assistance that they can access.

The Crisis Support Fund is a really important way of preventing people falling into homelessness. When people fall into rental arrears and then lose their home, it can lead to a cascade of other issues, which then makes it harder for them to get back on a better trajectory and so forth. So it does serve a really important role. It does not solve the underlying challenge—and that is not its purpose—which is that we need to have more affordable housing for people. We do not see any indication that the pressures in

the rental market are going to let up. So, in the foreseeable future, we see that there is going to be a need for that program. It serves a really important function. But what we really need to be doing is building the other supports so that people are not in that situation in the first place.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: What are the other supports?

Ms Dobson: I think we need to grow social housing and affordable housing. I think that is the most important option that we need to have in place. There may be there may be others. I do not know if ACTCOSS has any other suggestions around what we need to do in relation to that, But that is obviously the most important thing, and we know that that is not going to happen overnight. So that program continues to serve a really important role. But we do need to see other options to support people into, as I said, social housing. But affordable housing also has an important role to play. We do see some additional housing coming on to the market but, again, it still is not enough to meet the needs. So there is an urgent need for more of that housing.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Pardon my ignorance but what is a useful definition of “affordable housing”? You talked about the ACT market. Is it affordable housing relative to the ACT or is it relative to Australia?

THE CHAIR: That is a good question.

Ms Dobson: It is a very important question.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: That is the thing: is the ACT government and your organisation working off a similar definition?

Ms Dobson: In terms of how affordable housing is defined for the purpose of government programs, it is typically defined as up to 74.9 per cent of market rent. There is a challenge there in that market rent has increased over years, which means that it is certainly not affordable for someone in the first income quintile—so those on the lowest incomes. That is not designed necessarily for those on the lowest incomes but, increasingly, it is also not affordable to those in the second income quintile. We are seeing a growing gap between the threshold for social housing—when you are earning too much, you are not eligible for social housing—and the entry point into affordable housing. That is a real concern.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: It is almost bracket creep, in a way.

Ms Dobson: Yes, that is right. For affordable housing providers, it is a challenge. They do not have a business model that allows them to provide that diversified income base and, therefore, it is a challenge. There is a group of people kind of in the middle for whom there are not really the options there—or very limited options. Sometimes affordable housing providers may cross-subsidise some places, so that there may be some lower incomes. But, generally, they will have entry points for income, and we know that gap is growing. That is a challenge that I think needs to be considered more as well as what we can do for those people who are in the middle—lacking eligibility for social housing and cannot get on the waiting list, but there are

not the affordable housing options that they can afford and, therefore, there is very limited support for them.

Dr Bowles: I really want to second the view that increasing the stock of public housing and community housing is really important. I also want to commend the government for that new fund, which I think is a great investment. It keeps people in private dwellings, reducing pressure in lots of other places in the ACT government's budget—as well as being a nice human thing to do.

In terms of longer-term solutions, Ms Dobson has provided some suggestions, which I also support. I think increasing the amount of affordable housing long term, including by changing the requirement to get effectively government subsidies—extending the requirement that it remain as affordable housing for 15 to 20 years—could be really helpful. Another is focusing on non-profit providers that are there to make a difference in the community, so that we would then know, even if that housing stock reverts to for-profit in substance, those funds are going to be recycled into other things that are good for the community—so having a real emphasis on which providers are providing it.

The other approach I want to take is that the extra money for emergency rent assistance is good for rent and it is good for a particular cohort of people. That cohort of people often experiences financial stress from a number of different fronts. The ACT government has a number of different programs to try and help alleviate those stresses. They are kind of organised under the Targeted Assistance Strategy, which was developed, from memory, in 2012 and I think has not been reviewed since that time. We think that financial circumstances in the ACT have changed a lot since then, and it is time to review that. One of the potential benefits of such a review could be reducing administrative burden on both the ACT government and the people applying for those benefits. Often the criteria for one benefit are slightly different than the criteria for another and just slightly different from the criteria for another. That means that someone has to apply three different times to get three different benefits and the government has to evaluate that application three times. Making it one application has the possibility of meaning that people will be more likely to get all of what they are entitled to and save the ACT government money. It seems like a win-win there.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Thank you.

Ms Dobson: I might just add one of the strengths of the previous Rent Support Fund. Funding was provided by the ACT government but there was external funding access for financial counselling for private renters. So people who accessed the program were often referred to that. The reality is that not everyone is aware of some of the utilities concessions or other things that are actually there as part of the Targeted Assistance Program and the uptake is not full and people are not utilising those. One of the strengths of the model that was there was it meant that people could then be provided the information and supported to access those programs, which made a difference. My understanding is that there is not currently funding for the financial counselling for people who are in rental stress. We think a small amount of funding in that could also help. At the same time, as Devin said, we need to ensure that the systems are simpler and easier for people to access. It is something that we think can help people in a small but nonetheless potentially significant way, so that they are able

to access the concessions that are there and, again, hopefully are able to stay in the rental property that they are living in.

THE CHAIR: So we are talking about the previous rent relief scheme by Carers ACT and the new government replacement of that scheme. Is that right?

Ms Dobson: Yes, housing crisis fund.

THE CHAIR: The Housing Crisis Support Fund.

Ms Dobson: Yes, support fund.

THE CHAIR: What is the difference between the two? So there is no longer in the current government fund the financial counselling element of the scheme?

Ms Dobson: From the details that we have, it is more or less similar and mirrors the Rent Relief Fund. They do have an additional \$250. People who applied for it could get up to \$2,500 to pay the rent, but they have that additional \$250 for people who meet certain criteria. But, otherwise, it is more or less similar. An issue with the previous program and the way it was funded was that it provided the funds for the grants but it did not actually provide the funding to administer the program. When we have looked at the current funding allocated—of course, we do not have the breakdown for that and there are still details we do not have—it does not appear, based on the funding allocated, that there is funding to administer it. My understanding is that the financial counselling that was there was from an external source—it was not from the ACT government—and that is no longer available. I cannot speak on behalf of the service, but my understanding is that it is a concern that that is not there. The program can still operate without it but, clearly, when you have that financial counselling and additional support, it has the potential to ensure that people are getting what they need and in an ongoing way will be able to sustain their rent. That is my understanding of the current Housing Crisis Support Fund.

THE CHAIR: You talked about 74.9 per cent of—

Ms Dobson: Of market rent.

THE CHAIR: So 75 per cent of market rent to be affordable rental, and you talked about the difference between the entry point for community housing. Can you explain that a bit more? What does that mean?

Ms Dobson: It is complicated and there are different approaches taken by different providers and different requirements under different programs. So I want to be careful about speaking in blanket terms. But, certainly, some of the affordable housing providers will actually have, “These are entry incomes and, if you are below that income, you are not eligible.”

THE CHAIR: Below, not above?

Ms Dobson: Yes. My understanding is that is not specified by government generally—at least for the ACT programs. Also, they are looking at how they can

deliver the program. People are meant to be in that housing; they are not meant to be in rental stress. A challenge that the providers have highlighted is: “Okay; they are not meant to be in rental stress but, if it is only open to people below this income but we are charging it at market rent, how do we get people who can actually be eligible but not be in rental stress?” My understanding is that, with the land rent exemption scheme, they are struggling to fill the places because there is that issue. At the same time, if we keep increasing the entry point into these programs, that is also an issue, because we know that that means we are directing subsidies in a way that we are missing out on those people in the middle.

Those programs are really important, and we certainly want to see them be successful and support people who need them, but there are some of those challenging questions that need to be looked at. My understanding is that the government were undertaking a review of the income thresholds for that program, and we certainly support that review being undertaken. It is taking some time. So I think it is worthwhile getting some clarity around when they will complete that review into the income thresholds and the basis on which they set the threshold as well.

THE CHAIR: How long has the threshold been 74.9 per cent? Has it been a while?

Ms Dobson: That has been the standard definition for quite some time. It is also that is how it is set up under the Housing Australia Future Fund, the commonwealth program which is providing a lot of the funding for affordable housing in the ACT. That is a definition that is used nationally as well. But we see a similar issue in other jurisdictions where we are seeing the market rent go up so much more than incomes. It meets the definition of affordable by the government’s definition but whether it is affordable to people who are on low and modest incomes is sometimes another question.

MR EMERSON: I have a quick question on the income ranges. If you are means tested out of public housing at \$48,000 or something like that as a single person with no dependants, I suppose what you are getting at is that these affordable housing schemes might kick in at \$65,000 or \$70,000. Is that the range that you are really concerned about—people who might be earning \$50,000 a year, because they cannot access public housing and they cannot afford to access affordable housing and there is nothing for them? Do you have a sense of what that kind of income range looks like, generally speaking?

Ms Dobson: I do not have the figures in front of me. This is where we would like to see some proper analysis done and documentation on what the situation is and who is missing out and who is benefiting from these programs. I think the range may be slightly higher than what you are saying.

THE CHAIR: Yes, \$80,000 or something.

Ms Dobson: Yes, and it can also depend on the household type. Obviously, if you have two parents and several kids, then it is going to be set higher, and it is important that the thresholds do reflect the household composition. I think with HAFF, from memory—I want to be a bit careful, because I am aware I am on record and I do not want to get wrong—there is one threshold that they have for, I think, two parents and

two kids. There are some larger families as well and we need to ensure that we have thresholds that take into account different household compositions, and I am not sure that that is the case.

But, again, I think there needs to be more detail and just a bit more transparency about how some of those programs operate and ensure that they are operating as intended. Providers need to have a sustainable model to deliver it. That is a given. We need to make sure it is not a matter of set and forget and that we are actually looking at who is benefiting in terms of tenants and households and ensuring that the policies are designed effectively.

Dr Bowles: I think the point that Ms Dobson raises around the programs needing to be sustainable is a really important one. Ideally, we would like to see the amount of affordable housing being scaled up rapidly, which means providers need to be able to not be losing money on each one. So policy has to balance that goal with the goal of making sure those people who are stuck between public housing and affordable housing are also looked after. Overall, I think government policy needs to focus on accomplishing both of those things.

MS CARRICK: My question is about homelessness. I notice in the budget it says that there is funding for homelessness and housing support services for Samaritan House, Roadhouse, Bluedoor and Our Place Braddon to ensure the ongoing delivery of crucial specialist frontline services. Is that increase in funding of around \$4 million a year adequate for the homelessness sector? That measure also supports ACT Shelter. Is that adequate?

Ms Dobson: The services that got funding are obviously pleased to get it. One of the things that we saw in the budget was that there had been a number of contracts that had been one-year rollovers, particularly for some of those services that you mentioned, and this budget has provided four years, which is certainly a welcome relief. Having spoken to the services, I think they were still looking at whether it was status quo funding or additional funding. That was a little bit unclear. But, largely, as far as I can see, it is status quo funding for the services that you are talking about in the overall homelessness services system, noting there was some additional funding for housing for housing services in the Housing Asset Assistance Program. Is it sufficient to meet need? No. We know that we have an overstretched homelessness system, and we would anticipate that we will continue to see demand outstrip the supply of services.

There was funding for crisis and transitional housing. That was through a commonwealth scheme. That is welcome. Certainly from the services we know, our crisis centre and transitional housing system has been in a bit of a crisis itself, and people actually getting into it has been a challenge. But the difficulty is that there are bottlenecks in that system, particularly when there are large families. There is just no permanent social housing or other types of housing to place them into. That will continue to be a challenge, even with those welcome additional places.

I think the funding that was announced was welcome. But is it sufficient to meet need? On paper, it does not appear that it will be. But we have had a system under intense stress for a number of years. There were some announcements around Our

Place and for youth homelessness. We know the government has indicated that a youth homelessness strategy will be developed. Of course, it has not been developed yet and we have not seen the funding flow through to that. But we certainly hope that, in future budgets, we will see additional funding for particular cohorts who are very much over-represented in the homelessness statistics.

MS CARRICK: Thank you. There was also a measure about the government providing funding to support the delivery of crisis and transitional housing for vulnerable cohorts facing homelessness, in partnership with the commonwealth. I am sure I saw a tender whereby they are looking for providers to use the public housing stock. Are you aware of that mechanism that the government is trying to use to get more providers to use public housing?

Ms Dobson: There has been the use of hotel accommodation, and so they are currently conducting a trial where they are providing ACT dwellings to use for crisis and transitional housing. That will be coming out of the Housing ACT stock. That could be public housing dwellings. Not all Housing ACT stock is public housing, which is a point that we have underscored to government when they are reporting public housing—it is not the same as Housing ACT dwellings. If it is coming out of Housing ACT stock, that could be public housing being reallocated for those purposes. We need more crisis and transitional accommodation. There is a demonstrated need for it. But, as I mentioned, we also need to have pathways into that permanent housing, including public housing, and we need more of that. I think we need to ensure that, if we are taking some of that housing stock and using it for crisis and transitional housing, we are, overall, seeing that increase in public housing and social housing and also where people are able to go into affordable housing if they are in crisis and transitional as well.

MS CARRICK: Okay; thank you.

THE CHAIR: I want to go back to your comment that not all Housing ACT stock is public housing. I know some of them are leased to community housing providers. Is there any other, I guess, stock that is not community housing and that is not used? Do you know of any other mix?

Ms Dobson: There are a few different programs. They are usually reported in the annual reports. There is a program, which is affordable housing, for people aged over 65. There is also community housing that, from my understanding, is used for affordable housing as well as part of that. The arrangements in place differ. They are not always tenancies; there are often occupancy-type arrangements as part of that. It is quite a mixture of different residences. Most of Housing ACT stock is used for public housing. I think a bit less than 1,000 is used for other purposes.

When we are looking at the targets, the target that we had questioned that the government had used was 13,200. When we actually look at the figures for public housing, it does not appear that they can actually reach that number if they are talking about public housing. If they are talking about Housing ACT dwellings, okay; but we need to be consistent and clear on what we are talking about so that, when we are reporting on progress and understanding what is happening, we know that we are actually talking about what we are talking about.

THE CHAIR: The same thing, yes.

Ms Dobson: Yes. Getting that clarity and consistency with accepted definitions would help the Assembly, the community and others to understand where the progress is being made and what is going on.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. And just on—

MR BRADDOCK: Can I just jump in with a supp about that? You mentioned the youth homelessness strategy, and I would like your perspective on the need for that and what is required in that space.

Ms Dobson: We do have some excellent services on the ground, but we know that there is a lot of pressure in that part of the service system. So there certainly is the need for that and also potentially a need for a range of different options for young people. Youth Co got funding from the government to undertake a mapping of the sector and to support that work, and that is very much welcome. That is important. We need to have an understanding of what services are currently there and also what is needed. It is obviously critically important because, when a young person does experience homelessness, particularly if they are not supported and there is not that early intervention, it can lead to a cascade of other issues. It has long-term consequences and a lot of downstream costs for that person and also for the broader service system. It is a really important area. There is definitely a lot more that can be done, and we very much welcome the youth homelessness strategy. We want to see that get funded and we see those commitments to actually back a strategy up with some real action.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question about the Woden Youth Foyer, which was funded in the last budget. Do you have any updates on how that is functioning and serving the community?

Ms Dobson: My understanding is that it has opened. I do not know a lot about how it is operating at present. So it is probably not something that I can speak to. But it was welcome that it has opened.

MR BRADDOCK: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: I have one really quick question regarding on the final page of your submission around the human rights to housing. I know that the legislation is set to commence on 1 January 2027.

Ms Dobson: It is a little bit confusing. The full human right to housing does not commence at that date; it is phased in.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Dobson: I also do not think it is well understood what is happening on 1 January 2027 and what government needs to do to put that in place. It is not something where it just starts now and then we start doing the work we need to be doing—that

preparatory work, doing education and ensuring government directorates and agencies understand what their obligations are under the Human Rights Act, because it will have particular requirements for Housing ACT and government agencies. A key part of that and one of the important parts that we saw around that was progressive realisation of the human right to housing. Key to that is ensuring that we do have benchmarks in place and that we have clear monitoring, so we can actually monitor progress of government. We do not believe that that framework is currently in place. That is one of the key important things that we really would like to see. We should be working on that now. We hope we will see some movement on that.

THE CHAIR: Do you have something to add, Dr Wensing?

Dr Wensing: In other capacities I am a researcher in the human rights space. This has been a very important change to the Human Rights Act in the ACT and it is being watched from outside this jurisdiction. We have a chance here to really set some important benchmarks on how this might work into the future. So the work the territory government is going to have to do before 1 January 27 and in the subsequent couple of years before 1 January 2029 is really important foundational work that needs to be done.

THE CHAIR: Yes. Just to confirm: there was nothing in the budget indicating that that foundational work will commence?

Ms Dobson: We could not locate anything.

THE CHAIR: Okay; thank you.

Dr Wensing: It is not necessarily a criticism. It is just an observation that the clock is ticking over and I think the committee should be aware. As I say in my role as a researcher in the human rights space, there are lots of people watching and our performance is going to be measured in the future.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you very much.

Short suspension

CRIMMINS, MS FRANCES, Chief Executive Office, YWCA Canberra
DWYER, MS LEAH, Director of Policy and Advocacy, YWCA Canberra
KARLSSON, MS TIFFANY, Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre
ROSENMAN, MS ELENA, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Legal Centre ACT
WEBECK, MS SUE, Chief Executive Officer, Domestic Violence Crisis Service

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

As we will not be inviting opening statements we would now like to proceed to questions. One of the questions I have is coming out of the last session around the difference between affordable housing as per the definition used by the commonwealth and the ACT and the entry point into community housing. I just wanted to get a clearer understanding of how that works. One of the concerns we heard from the last session is that the percentage has not changed and that that has a significant impact on the entry point, so there is essentially a missing middle in affordability. I know the YWCA provide community housing as well.

Ms Crimmins: Yes, and this is in direct relation to our Rentwell program. The whole design of the Rentwell program is to capture that missing middle for people on moderate incomes. The ACT government still operate under the old NRAS income scheme, which we know is over two decades old, and the income levels have not increased at all apart from marginal, tiny wage increases. So today in 2026, the maximum income you can have as an individual is \$64,000 to be eligible for a property in the land tax exemption scheme. And to put that in context, a certificate III early learning employee, thanks to the wage retention bonus, now earns more than that. So the scheme is designed to house these people who were traditionally low-income earners and now their wages exceed the maximum for an individual. For a family the maximum goes up by an additional \$20,000 per each child.

So what we are seeing is that we cannot take properties of the philanthropic landlords who are prepared to take less than market rent. We know the average market rent now is \$830 a week, and 75 per cent of that puts those people earning less than \$64,000 in extreme rental stress, and we are talking 40, 50 per cent. So what we will see is the collapse of this scheme. So if we aligned ourselves with Housing Australia income rentals, the income that they have set, we will have a parallel program operating in the ACT. So any properties coming under Housing Australia under the commonwealth government have a different income band to the old NRAS, so we have two. So it depends where you are fortunate enough to come in.

In terms of the direct relation to the ACT land tax exemption scheme, the income thresholds are too old for the people we are aiming to house. This program is not about housing people on welfare. It never was for people who need public or social housing; it is about the continuum of housing. If you look at the impact on the people who we have housed, they are able to maintain their affordable rent, and some have even gone on to home ownership. It is about the continuum of housing on offer in the ACT. And without a change to these income limits, we will continue to turn away

properties that could actually house a single parent with three children because their income level is deemed too high under income thresholds that are two decades old.

THE CHAIR: So the impact of not having that increase in salary threshold is that you are turning away properties that would ordinarily be available to rent at an affordable rate.

Ms Crimmins: Correct.

THE CHAIR: But you are also not capturing the missing middle of affordability because of the increase in wages has put them outside the bracket that you can capture.

Ms Crimmins: Correct, yes.

MR EMERSON: What would be a better threshold?

Ms Crimmins: So we recommend that we align to what Housing Australia is putting. They have different income thresholds across each state and territory, but they have done that analysis. I think the easiest thing to do would be to pick up what Housing Australia have already determined is the income threshold for any Housing Australia properties that will be built in the ACT so we are not running two income programs for affordable housing. It just confuses people.

MR BRADDOCK: The government set a target of 1,000 affordable rental homes being made available through the scheme. Are the policy settings sufficient to meet this target?

Ms Crimmins: Absolutely not.

MR BRADDOCK: What needs to change in order to successfully achieve that target?

Ms Crimmins: The income thresholds need to be increased. Right now we have about 160 properties in this scheme, but I will say we have some very generous property owners who are renting at 65, 70 per cent voluntarily to allow us to house the people on the income levels now. That is not sustainable for a lot of people. A lot of property owners who generally want to come in the scheme need to at least have that 74.9 per cent. So our numbers are only being sustained because of some philanthropic property owners.

MR BRADDOCK: If potential tenants are not able to access your scheme, they are basically ending up on the public housing waiting list, I assume?

Ms Crimmins: I think they just move to housing stress. Sadly, we have seen cases where people's situations have gone backwards. If you cannot maintain a house, you cannot maintain employment, and then you potentially could end up being eligible for social housing, unfortunately.

Ms Dwyer: Many of them would earn too much to be on the public housing list. So you would add people to the private rental market who would be experiencing stress in that market.

THE CHAIR: Because they cannot access public housing and community housing, does that then mean homelessness for some?

Ms Crimmins: They just have to manage somehow, or possibly go into the private rental in extreme housing stress. To put it in context, a gentleman walked up to me in the street and introduced himself to say, “I just want to tell you how you housed me and my three children when I was discharged from Defence, a mental health breakdown.” Without that property owner renting a suitable house at 50 per cent market rent, he would be homeless.

MS CARRICK: Would people find themselves in inappropriate housing if they cannot afford private rental? Would a family with three kids go into a small apartment with one bedroom and try and squeeze in there to be able to make it more affordable? Is that the sort of thing that happens?

Ms Crimmins: I think people put together all sorts of alternatives to try to keep themselves housed. We certainly see lots of people using family and overstaying their welcome. Sadly, what we are seeing reflected sometimes is camping. So people are having to be creative with how they house themselves if they cannot afford private market rent. Remember, you are competing with people who have full-time jobs moving here on professional wages. So discrimination, rightly or wrongly, occurs in the private rental market frequently.

MS CARRICK: You said the same thing with the income levels with the public housing list. Has that gone up or not?

Ms Crimmins: It has just gone up by the same amount. But we are not necessarily advocating that that changes because that should be for people who are on social welfare supports for our most vulnerable. But they are probably more secure because it is income-based rent once you are in one of those properties as opposed to somebody in the private rental market, which we know is increasing exponentially in terms of rent.

MR EMERSON: We have a very heavy-hitting panel here, so thanks for coming in all together. Does the budget enable you to support every woman who reaches out requiring access to your crisis services? If not, what level of funding or what proportion of funding increase would actually make that possible?

Ms Webeck: Just as a point of clarification, our service is responding to everybody in the community impacted by violence. So in terms of the budget announcements for the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, what those announcements enable us to do is maintain our service delivery levels as is in a more stable fashion over hopefully the coming years as those contracts are settled for a maximum of three years. The additional component in the budget is two full-time equivalent staff. Two positions of 38 hours, which is the standard full-time equivalency, in a crisis service that operates

168 hours a week is not as grandiose as two full-length positions for the cycle of our crisis line.

At this stage, what we are hoping is that we will be able to increase the answer rate on our crisis line, but by no means are we going to be able to meet the demand. That is going to take some long-term, sustained investment. We have done what we can in terms of pivoting our service model in order to maximise efficiency and triaging, but that increase of two full-time equivalent positions is not going to solve our unanswered call issue.

MR EMERSON: Have you modelled what number of positions would?

Ms Webeck: We have spent the last five years working to budget figures that are set and having to design services to maximise the impact of the money that is made available in that context and then also working to map our answer rates and our service efficiencies. We have spent a lot of resource having to respond to contracting processes, external review processes. There was an external crisis services review a couple of years ago. It provided some insights as to what government may need to do in order to meet the current demand in the community. We have not been in a position to either financially map what that would look like, nor have we got the capacity to do that at this stage based on the fact that we keep getting looped into an incredible labour of government administration around reform agendas but also our contracting processes and the like.

The easy form thing would be to say we have been talking about only being able to answer 50 per cent of the call rate. That would indicate that there needs to be a doubling of our funding in order to be able to meet demand. I do not think it is that simple and I actually think it is less than that in order to be able to achieve that. But certainly we have not had the capacity or resource to do that mapping work.

Ms Rosenman: I would say from the Women's Legal Centre perspective that one of the things we really welcomed in this year's budget was the announcement of continuous ongoing funding for two programs. One was our Aboriginal women's program and the other was the ACT's contribution to our core program. The latter is the equivalent of about \$435,000, so it is very low.

I should say that the Women's Legal Centre is funded by both the commonwealth and ACT governments. The positive thing in this budget for us was that both of those streams of funding were made both continuous and ongoing. That was very positive because we have been applying for that funding year on year for at least the last five years.

To your point around have we modelled the cost, one of the positive things for us is that the removal of that piece of administration both from us and, importantly, from the directorate as well might actually start to open up some space for some conversations that are not just the same conversation and business case going through every year. So I think that was really positive.

When I think about what is required to meet the need, certainly the thing that comes to my mind is secure funding, which is different from adequate funding. While I would

welcome secure funding, I would say we are a long way from adequate funding, and actually even from having visibility on both legal need in relation to gender-based violence but also, as my colleagues will attest, other therapeutic and community-based supports. We have seen, for example, at Women's Legal Centre last year a 40 per cent increase in requests for assistance from the service. This is why funding security is welcome, but really the sorts of numbers that we are talking about in terms of funding adequacy is really significant.

One of the other things that I think is important to understand and that I am not sure that this jurisdiction has grappled with is actually the missing infrastructure, corporate and central functions in a lot of community-based services. Certainly we welcomed the community sector uplift funding that I think was announced for two years last year, so it will continue next year as well. But to give you an indication, the centre used that to supplement the first time that we had ever had a people and culture function at the centre.

We have a staff of almost 50—a high number of part-time staff, a high number of staff from diverse backgrounds, a lot of international students, women from different cultures, women with disability. The work we do is a particular type of taxing work, so actually being able to support core basic functions like people and culture is important. I would say most people from the outside would assume we had a very well-resourced function in that space. It is just an example of the kinds of investments that we need to think about. It is not just about frontline service delivery; it is also around building the infrastructure that is required.

I think this government is very active in its discussion about building for a growing city when it comes to things like public transport and other things like that. But we have not had a discussion about what is the social safety net this government wants to be providing and what is the ambition. I think that all of us here would be servicing only a very small proportion of the people that come to us for assistance. The government is currently outsourcing to us the decision about how we triage those requests. And I think there is a missing community conversation about what we think the expectation should be.

THE CHAIR: And the risk—outsourcing the risk as well.

Ms Rosenman: Yes. And also, where we draw that line, as Frances just talked about, it affects how people move through the system and the denigration of people's circumstances over time. So even if we decide as a community and we are honest about it that we are only going to capture this percentage of the people that need assistance, we need to make that decision with eyes wide open about which 30 per cent we are choosing, or whatever it is.

Ms Crimmins: For us it was not an extension; it did not give us additional resources. What it gave us was no more funding cliffs. For us, that is only four specialist workers. What we were not aware of at the time was that it did not include the children's workers. So just to be clear, all the announcements around the workers to support children and young people were not included in that core and ongoing. We would really encourage that to be looked at because our protective parent does not stand in

isolation. We need to look after children and young people if we are going to break the cycle. So it just maintained for us; no new capacity.

THE CHAIR: You talked about funding cliffs, Can you explain that?

Ms Crimmins: So we were all on the same one, two, three-year arrangement; it was like step funding cliffs. It was from the combination of whether the funding was coming from the federal or the ACT governments. So for us, having part of it put in core and ongoing is a relief because our employees are professional, qualified social workers, and maintaining their knowledge and specialist base is really important. So we are no longer on that, but it was only the four positions for us. And what we did not understand at the time is it does not include any of the announcements for children and young people, not just for YWCA Canberra. That was for all of the announcements for children and young people workers who have experienced family and domestic violence.

Ms Karlsson: It is similar for us as well. We also support anyone affected by sexual violence, so not just women but also children, gender-diverse people and men. We have also been facing a funding cliff so we are really grateful for the support from the government, but it is not as though we are getting a great uplift. So we had been facing a 60 per cent funding cut over the next four years, so we have been really happy that we are not facing those cuts.

We had a range of programs that were set to end from our base—crisis support, counselling, crisis work, all of our core work. Some of that was set to cease funding. Our service assisting male survivors of sexual assault was set to end this financial year as well and now those programs will continue. We were facing losing a number of programs so the fact that we now have stable funding is fantastic for us.

But similar to other organisations, our funding is not sufficient in terms of the modelling that we have done. So we will retain our funding across some of those programs but not all, and I will go into a bit more detail shortly. We have modelled that for the work we are currently doing it would cost \$10 million if we were adequately funding it. Currently our \$6 million will continue, which is great but it is still not where it needs to be. So we are still below where we need to be just to fund our 24-hour service currently. And that does not even go into what we know we could be doing in the community—for example, more education, having more counsellors and so on. So it is an improvement, but it is not the full answer, I would not have thought.

We were running an independent sexual violence advisor service which was in a pilot phase. So that was set to end as well, so that was another cliff. That has been announced that that will continue, which is fantastic. So that will roll into the three-year funding cycle, which is fantastic. We do have one service that was announced to be concluding previously, so over a year ago, and that is definitely finishing. Our Nguru program, which was our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program, ended on 30 June. Funding for that has now moved to the Aboriginal community-controlled sector.

That was not a choice of ours; this was a choice of government and it has been something that came out of the Long Yarn report and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Expert Reference Group. So advice from that group went to the government. The government made a decision in the Long Yarn report around self-determination. So that program ending was not something that was changed in the outcome of the recent funding announcement. Now the government has announced further funding for ACCOs to deliver sexual violence services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So we are pleased that there is more money in the sector supporting that cohort, which is very much needed, but that was not a decision of ours in terms of that funding ending. That is just one exception to the other programs that we are now seeing extended in our organisation.

MR EMERSON: So I have got it straight, ending funding cliffs means two more roles at DVCS? I forget the figure for the overall package announcement. Were there other roles that were also part of that?

Ms Webeck: I think we need to be really clear that for DVCS this is part of our service delivery offering. We have other contracts with HCSD that are only one year or two years, so this is only a portion of the core function of DVCS.

MR EMERSON: But that FDSV funding package announcement was mostly just ending the funding cliffs—or some of the funding cliffs?

Ms Karlsson: Some of the funding cliffs.

MR EMERSON: Plus two roles, but no-one else got extra roles.

Ms Webeck: No.

Ms Karlsson: There was no extra uplift for us.

Ms Webeck: And we are all still contracted for a period of time, so—

MR EMERSON: The funding cliff is still four years away.

Ms Webeck: No. At maximum we will get three years at DVCS.

MS CARRICK: I just want to clarify the funding cliff. You will be back in the same position in three years when you are not sure whether—

Ms Rosenman: For the Women's Legal Centre at least what we understand is that the funding is provisioned in the outyears. So it is not quite the same position insofar as it should be a more downhill slide.

MS CARRICK: There is a measure for you that talks about ongoing funding, which one assumes is ongoing. But for some of this other stuff it just goes out to 2029-30. It does not say ongoing in the measure, so presumably you get another three-year contract at that point.

Ms Crimmins: Yes.

Estimates—3-07-26

P54

Ms F Crimmins, Ms L Dwyer
Ms T Karlsson, Ms E Rosenman
and Ms S Webeck

MS CARRICK: So there is a funding cliff not in a 12-month period but in a three-year period.

Ms Webeck: So money will be in the system, but where that goes is dependent on contracting processes. We certainly hope we would be moving towards five or seven-year contracts at that time. But at this stage the contract we will ultimately receive—at the moment we are on a bridging contract for those core services—will see out until the end of 2028-29. Then ideally in the early part of 2028-29 there would be a contracting process which would enable a smoother transition rather than waiting for budget announcements in the week or two before the end of the financial year.

Ms Crimmins: It is really important to have this if we are looking at systems. For example, if we are going to access more housing from the commonwealth government through their crisis and transitional housing, which they are funding up to 25 years, you have to demonstrate you have the support service. That is nearly impossible when you have to say, “Well, actually I have it till this point.” So we really need to make sure that both systems are lining up so we can get some of that commonwealth funding.

Ms Karlsson: I think there is an important point around the commonwealth funding in terms of a lot of money has been committed to frontline services around the country by the federal government, and getting the transparency about how that money is flowing through to us as individual organisations is something I would like to see. I would like to see that transparency and understanding how the federal dollars are intended to come to us and how they are actually flowing.

MS CARRICK: Is there greater transparency in the safer families?

Ms Webeck: There was a fact sheet produced this year that goes to talk to a number of measures but also the dollar values, et cetera. There is probably some specificity to that that you might need interpretation from government Treasury specifically on, but a fact sheet provided.

MR BRADDOCK: My question is for the Y in terms of the trend of funding for children, young people and families. Investment in the statutory system seems to take up the vast majority of the funding rather than the early intervention program. What are your views on that current distribution of funding, and is that achieving the desired outcomes that we want for children, young people and families?

Ms Crimmins: We are very concerned that the data analysis that has been completed is showing that we have not actually seen an increase in early intervention for child, youth and family programs for well over a decade. It has remained stagnant and there has been an emphasis on statutory. We are also concerned with the upcoming commissioning that we may lose some of that early intervention funding into the statutory.

To give you an example, a program that we run, Warm Connections, works with children, young people and families. Most of the referrals come from the schools because they can only work with a child or young person, not the family. If that

moves to a statutory function you actually have to have your children removed. As far as we are aware, that is the only early intervention counselling program for children before we are removing and separating families. If that moves to statutory that would be a big loss, and that is an ACT-wide program.

We are also concerned about universal access for youth. We have not had an increase in that since it was last commissioned in 2012. So to lose universal access for young people, given the population growth across the ACT since it was last commissioned in 2012, there is no indication at all that that funding is going to increase.

What we do know is that children and young people who come to our service—caring responsibilities, impacted by family violence—that their needs are not being met. We are not able to service what we have today across the ACT, and I am very concerned that the commissioning could actually see a reduction in early intervention.

Ms Rosenman: There are also growing rates of developmental vulnerability among young people in Canberra which I do not think is being reflected in policy decisions by government.

MR BRADDOCK: So supply is stagnant. Demand, I assume, is increasing not just due to development but other factors with population growth and so forth. What has been your experience of the commissioning process in terms of how has that impacted you and your organisations and across the board as well?

Ms Crimmins: We have been concerned that the commissioning process has not actually resulted in improvements to the system; it has just turned into competitive tendering. From our perspective, what we have seen with the commissioning for housing and homelessness services is that it has actually probably taken us backwards in terms of outcomes of what we all put forward.

We have spent so much time and so many resources and years doing listening reports and filling in surveys for the sector coming together to design this. We have not seen any evidence that that is going to come forward in the grant rounds that are about to open we have been told in a fortnight. So again, I think if we had listened through the commissioning process, we would have been able to pick up the issues like the declining data on child development, school readiness, supporting the families who are not in statutory jurisdiction. I am a bit concerned none of that has been picked up.

MR BRADDOCK: You mentioned we have gone backwards. Are you able to provide examples of that?

Ms Crimmins: For example, the sector recommended for the homeless commissioning that one cohort should not sit with one organisation in its entirety because relationships break down. I will give a really good example of that from our own perspective. We had a very complex family that had been passed to us from after that relationship had broken down with one provider. We were able to care for that family and provide the support. This is a family who will need support, we think, ongoing. We were able to do that for three years through those relationships and complexities. We were then able to then hand them over to the third provider doing families. If one provider is doing one cohort, like youth homelessness, where does

that young person go if that relationship breaks down? Right now we only have one provider for youth homelessness funding.

Ms Webeck: I think understanding that commissioning has been broken into a variety of different sort of sectors and sub-sectors depends on sort of the experience that individual services may or may not have had in that and whether sector mapping has actually been undertaken. Certainly DVCS's experience of commissioning has been considerable participation in a variety of commissioning setup processes over the last couple of years but also around contract and grant response processes that ultimately have not actually landed us anywhere.

DVCS is the closest—the announcement in the budget means that we have a four-month bridging contract that we have had to do a series of work in order to be able to sign. And over the next four months that core set of services for us will be negotiated into a contract that will land us at the end of three years. But at the moment there has been quite a considerable amount of administration and activity for us to participate in processes that have not actually landed any solid resolution or outcome, which is difficult.

So this is the longest contract we will have had in three years, or two years and eight months when we get to it. So that is a good outcome. But is it the best possible outcome? I would argue no, it's not. And I think the experience of commissioning across the broader community services sector is quite varied depending on where their funding streams are and which processes they have been allocated into.

Ms Karlsson: I am newer to this space and I have not been involved in what the outcomes of commissioning were meant to achieve. But my experience has been that I have been told there is a certain pool of money and that is what I have to make do with. What I would have liked to have seen was a bit more of a strategic commissioning also related to some of the work that ACT has been doing. For example, the 2024 review that was referenced earlier about some of our frontline services said we needed to do a range of things, so for that last 18 months since I have been here we have been flat-out looking at our capability, our IT, our structure, organisational sustainability, staff training and wellbeing. There are so many things that we are working on developing. I would have liked to have seen the commissioning process linked into things that the ACT government has told us we should be achieving.

Ms Crimmins: There does not seem to be a link between the data of the programs that are running now. We still choose as a service to do six-month reporting, and the government has extended that to 12-month reporting. I have not seen any evidence of those reports being utilised to determine community need, and that is part of the gaps that we identify.

There was a recent decision without consultation where I think they think they are helping us by saying, "You don't need to do your next 12-month contract report because the grants are coming up," but September tells me that the last 12 months' worth of data and seeing the need and understanding what is going on in community actually is not going to even inform the commissioning grant process because they will not have that data until after the decision has been made.

Ms Karlsson: I agree, and it would be good if it were more strategic. We know sexual violence rates, according to a recent survey in the ACT for women, have doubled the rates of the general population. A women's health matter survey said 40 per cent of women and nationally it is one in five. It would be great if we could see the commissioning and the funding linked to the community need for our different organisations.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: There is funding in the budget to establish an information-sharing coordinator and to support a network for advocacy, coordination and workforce development in domestic, family and sexual violence. Will these measures make an impact on the overall response in the ACT? If not, what else should the government be doing and what would be some useful next steps that the ACT government would be thinking about in terms of strengthening the network and expanding the network in future budgets?

Ms Dwyer: We have not got advice about the role of the information-sharing coordinator. I knew it was in the budget, but it has not come to us.

Ms Webeck: I can respond to the information-sharing coordination function. The information share coordinator is funding that is allocated to the operation of the information share legislation that has been tabled and is going through. It will create a legislative framework that compels and allows for information sharing in relation to risk and safety for community members who are experiencing domestic and family violence using domestic and family violence in a way that helps systems transparency and systems to be able to assess risk and be able to respond across agencies. There are already some legislative frameworks that allow for that to happen, but this is an expansion to cover particular areas that maybe do not interact with those other pieces of legislation. So that includes things like health and education.

The information share coordinator function I have less information about. There will need to be an information share coordinator who will be the arbitrator of decisions about whether an agency should be compelled to provide information requested by another information share entity. Most of them are government agencies. There are non-government agencies that have been invited to accept an invitation to join the information share and become an information share entity. Those decisions are forthcoming over the next couple of months. But the information share coordinator will be the government function that actually coordinates that process and that you can put requests to and they will be able to theoretically compel parts of the system to share relevant pieces of information. Where that sits in government will be a decision for government. How that functions, I do not know.

Do I have opinions about the complexity of having an information share coordinator sitting inside government? If you are a non-government organisation and your funding sits with government, how independent is that, how does that interrelate, what are the measures that can be compelled under all of those bits and pieces. That is quite complex, but that really is about the operation of a discrete piece of legislation that is going to be somewhat administratively burdensome for many parts of the sector.

The network component I would say is starting to talk about sort of a non-government kind of peak system by any other name. It is a very minimal amount of money. I think the first phase of that money is for scoping. I think that is incredibly important. There is not enough money in the service system to be covering off prevention, early intervention, response, healing and recovery, accountability for those who are using violence and behaviour change. So money allocated to a non-government kind of organisation network I think is incredibly important but needs to be scoped to understand what it is that government is hoping to get out of that but also how best that money can be utilised.

I think we need to be really cautious that that is not seen as a replacement for the very real need around governance structures when it comes to the domestic family sexual violence strategy or governance structures that have been decommissioned over time, like the Domestic Violence Prevention Council. So that money to scope the network, I think we just need to be really kind of cautious that that is not a solution to a number of the issues that have been raised and that the work of deeply working with the sector to scope how best to maximise that money, and for what purpose and what utility is incredibly important.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: So something for the stakeholder committees to be watching really closely. I am talking about committees in the Assembly. To go back to the coordinator, is that a position that is replicated anywhere else? Do you know of other jurisdictions where it has worked well or not?

Ms Webeck: There are jurisdictions that have information sharing pathways. Some jurisdictions have them but do not have a compellable component where you are required. It provides allowance to share under legislation that keeps an organisation safe and limits the boundaries of how you can actually share that information or deem that information necessary to share.

The ACT's design of that in the legislation that has come forward is slightly different in those parameters. I think one of the issues that we have is over a period of time the government has very rightly said that everyone has a role to play in responding to domestic, family and sexual violence in our community and preventing it, but there has been a considerable expansion of government service delivery, government policy and government contract management and there is not a clear delineation all of the time between those areas. That means that having an information share coordinator that holds a level of power around compelling agencies—

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: That is going to be a key stress point in terms of how information is accepted, how it is shared, how it is provided as well.

Ms Webeck: Absolutely. But also the risk particularly non-government agencies hold in maintaining relationships with their clients when often some of those government services are punitive in the way they are set up and designed to actually interact with community at times. So there is not, again, a resource and a function to fund an information share coordinator likely to be in government. I cannot see that happening any other way through budget or conversations. But there is a large burden of risk around the information share that will be sitting with non-government organisations comparable to the government organisations that will be within that scheme.

MS CARRICK: You were talking before, Ms Crimmins, about one cohort being looked after by one provider and so perhaps not having resilience across the sector. If everyone is competing for the work and you have big organisations that are good at it putting in bids, is there a risk that some of the smaller organisations do not get the work and fall out of the sector and we lose some resilience from as a result?

Ms Crimmins: I think that is a very important thing to note. We would strongly advocate that local ACT-based organisations serve their local communities the best. We all have relationships with our communities. I am concerned that some of the organisations who currently hold funding and might be doing niche work for one element of the community may not be funded in this commissioning. I think there is a risk because what we are hearing in the language is they are talking about wanting one connected system. I would be very concerned if one organisation, for example, got the entire youth engagement funding to cover the whole of ACT. I do not think that serves young people well at all. I really think we need to be cognisant of that. If that happens, that would be a poor outcome for our families and children and young people.

Ms Webeck: We are not talking about commissioning construction of a building where you can show a series of codes and here are the four other buildings that we have built. There is actually an expertise in a lot of the service delivery. And so if procurement processes are judging on policy compliance and funding in a dollar amount, et cetera, but do not necessarily have the skills or expertise to assess the competency and capability of that service to deliver that technical expertise in the way that they are delivering the service as well as integrate and work into the broader service sector and with the broader service sector, then we fall foul to larger organisations who might have a cost efficiency being able to get through that process not only because they can resource the application but also because the dollar amount is going to unintentionally potentially cost undercut any of the other services who might be having to say, “We need to bring on a full suite of new staff. We can’t just backfill some of it with existing personnel or the like.” There is a technical evaluation expertise that I think needs to be very carefully considered in those commissioning processes as well.

Ms Crimmins: The local industry participation component that they say is 10 per cent weighting does not actually seem to make a difference at all in the outcome. That goes to my point around not looking at data that is in the current system. I say this respectfully, but I think what happens within HCSD is that there is such an internal focus, except for the statutory areas where they are clearly engaged in. I have concerns that with the early intervention work that has been occurring over the last 12 years, what happens on the ground in communities is not well understood by people making the decisions on this commissioning ground in terms of the time they have taken to look up, read the case studies, understand the data and see the gaps. That is my biggest concern.

MS CARRICK: I have just heard of one organisation that has been around for over 60 years and they cannot compete with the big head office from the national organisation. They put in over 10 bids and not won any of them, so they will just go backwards and lose their work.

Ms Crimmins: What we would say is why does the local industry participation of organisations registered here, who invest the money here, who have head offices in Canberra and who invest the money back in Canberra not win work? It is a real concern and we have seen it happen.

Ms Dwyer: And with the effectiveness of the Secure Local Jobs Code as well, what does it matter when we have these big procurement processes that do not land with providers that have runs on the board in the ACT?

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected *Proof Hansard*. Thank you very much.

Hearing suspended from 12.53 pm to 1.45 pm

BURROUGHS, MS ANGELA, Branch President, Australian Education Union, ACT Branch

ELLIOTT, MS VERONICA, Executive Officer, ACT Parents

JUDGE, MR PATRICK, Branch Secretary, Australian Education Union, ACT Branch

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings for the Select Committee on Estimates 2026-2027. We welcome witnesses from ACT Parents and the ACT branch of the Australian Education Union.

Please note that as witnesses you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth, as giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions.

My first question is to ACT Parents. In your media release dated 10 June 2026 in response to the ACT budget, you said in relation to the \$9.3 million committed to the implementation of the public school resourcing review, “We would have liked to see a stronger long-term investment in rebuilding public education. The funding announced today is only a start.” Are you confident that the ACT government would follow through with the scale of investment needed to deliver real reform, rather than leaving these systemic issues unresolved—given the small amount of money that has been allocated so far?

Ms Elliott: Well, I think it is important to acknowledge that the review sets out a big piece of reform and the \$9.3 million is an initial investment. We acknowledge that. We would like to see a longer-term plan for investment in that piece of work because we do recognise that it is going to take a significant period of time. And we also expect that \$9.3 million will not be able to, potentially, achieve everything that we would like to achieve in this 2026-2027 financial year.

THE CHAIR: So, with the \$9.3 million for the initial plan, you say that that does not go enough to address the issues that are hopefully going to be covered in that tranche of implementation?

Ms Elliott: I think it is unclear at this point in time, to us, what it will look like next year in school for students and families. And, whilst planning is a significant and valuable exercise, what families are saying to us is that they want to see some change on the ground. And so, what will be the change on the ground that occurs is still unclear. We note that the minister has set out a reform partners group, and ACT Parents look forward to participating in that group because we believe that collaboration with stakeholders and the users of the system will be really important to ensure that each of the recommendations in the review are actually implemented—and implemented successfully.

THE CHAIR: So, you are looking forward to participating in the work, the Reform Partners Group. Have you been invited or are you hoping to—?

Ms Elliott: We have received notification that that will be taking place and that we will be part of that group, and that will commence next term—because, obviously, today is the last day of term.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Of term, yes, okay.

Ms Elliott: Some people will be having a standdown.

THE CHAIR: Yes. And do you have anything to add to that?

Ms Burroughs: In relation to your question, “Is the \$9.3 million sufficient?”, what I would note is that it is funding for some preliminary work, essentially to get some fundamental corporate systems in place—particularly HR, finance and asset management. So, it kind-of does not give us an ability to project forward because it really is just to get some fundamentals in place.

But having said that, our members have experienced reform fatigue from initiatives being implemented that are not sufficiently resourced. So, the fact that this is a “go slowly, carefully and do the preliminary work to identify just what overall quantum of funding is required to bring about the change” is positive, but it just is frustrating because it is going to take so long.

THE CHAIR: And what sort of mix would you have loved to see, noting the fatigue that you have mentioned? Would you have loved to see, for example, some more substantial reforms in parallel to the go-slow—noting, again, what you have mentioned, that parents want to see change on the ground.

Ms Burroughs: Look, it is frustrating to not have some fundamental corporate systems in place that you would expect that a large bureaucracy would have developed. I guess a different way of answering your question is to look at one of the other initiatives that has been funded, and that is some preliminary assessment of the capacity for an expanded flexible education system.

It seems unusual that a small amount of money is provided to do some initial investigation when that report has been finalised and it has recommended the quantum of places that need to be made available, which is five times as many as currently are available. So, that is an example of a sort of a disappointment, that a projected investment to get to that desired state is not provided for in this budget.

THE CHAIR: Essentially, a plan to make a plan.

MS LEE: Just in terms of the \$9.3 million—and I know that there has been sort of talk about it and even the minister, in answers to, not only when she announced it before the budget, but also in answers to questions in question time, confirmed that that money is all going to go to systems, as opposed to frontline, which has also been confirmed here.

The other concerning thing—and does this concern you?—and this is a question for both of you—is that in the budget itself, it does not actually make any provision for further funding in the forwards, either. Hence the lack of long-term investment. So,

given that the \$9.3 million is the total sum of what the ACT government has budgeted for this, as the minister calls it, once-in-a-generation reform, and none of it is going to the front line, can you provide your views or the concerns that you have around that?

Ms Burroughs: Sure. Yes, there is a big gap, isn't there? But I can understand the pragmatic approach, which is: we do not actually know what size of that additional funding—assuming it is additional, and I can confidently project that it will be—what the size of that will be. So, it would be unwise to put in a projection when you have not done the initial work to understand what the need is.

MS LEE: Yes, but the \$9.3 million has been split across all four years, so that is going to make it difficult, isn't it, if that is going to take that long for that initial thing to happen and you are not going to see any funding toward frontline until after that period, which is going to be after the four-year forwards?

Ms Burroughs: I had assumed annual adjustments.

MS LEE: I think there is a hope there!

MR EMERSON: I just wanted to jump back to the flexible education review, which I understood was provided to the government in March or to the Education Directorate in March, or due to be. But I have not seen it. You have seen it?

Mr Judge: Yes.

MR EMERSON: You mentioned that they have done the flexible education review; it required a five times uplift in funding; the budget contains, rather than an uplift in funding, funding to do feasibility study to, presumably, uplift funding. But you have seen the review, I assume?

Mr Judge: Yes.

MR EMERSON: And that is the main funding is—?

Mr Judge: The main one that is of interest to the AEU and its members is a confirmation of something that we have been saying for a very long time, which is that the number of places in flex-ed settings for the ACT is grossly insufficient for the number of students that we have.

There are a number of challenges in that space, though, and it does make sense that you would have to do some work around how you, then, go and meet that need. The appropriate physical spaces for those programs do not appear to be also a concern in the report.

MR EMERSON: Do you have any concern that—so, the funding and the budget papers for a feasibility for expansion of the flex-ed and special schools, there is \$100,000 this financial year and \$500,000 in 2027-28, which, presumably, means no actual expansion occurs until the following financial year. Given the impact on your members and also on students and their families, is that concerning?

Mr Judge: Well, the need is there now for that level of support, so it is concerning to have to wait.

Ms Elliott: I think it is concerning for the number of students whose local public school is not meeting their needs. And where else do they go? Sometimes they are making other choices out of necessity, like finding an alternate offering that might be costing their family more money, or home education, which we know has increased.

MR BRADDOCK: Can you articulate for me what the impacts are of the go-slow, in terms of actually implementing the report's recommendations? Because you are saying the government is going to take time to go through some of these enabling activities before they actually deliver something. What are the impacts to ACT children in the meantime?

Ms Burroughs: Yes, perhaps "go-slow" is an unfortunate expression. It is about doing the work properly and getting an accurate estimate of what the reform will cost. So, on the one hand, our members are frustrated; frustrated at the lack of working corporate systems that the independent resourcing review identified. So, in relation to workforce planning, in relation to financing, for instance.

But there is no point in putting through bodged reforms. We would rather get it right but there has to be an interim way forward. We cannot wait for two, three, four more years to be able to do proper workforce planning and budgeting. So, I am pleased that we are having these open and constructive conversations with the education directorate representatives—and the minister herself is actively involved in those, to deal with the immediate priorities.

MR EMERSON: Ms Elliott, you mentioned that sometimes if the local public school does not meet a family's needs then they will choose another option, which has shown up in the data. Public ACT school enrolments data since 2021 show year-on-year decreases in total public school enrolments despite steady population growth, and increases in non-government school enrolments. I am curious for everyone's views on, one, are you concerned by this? Two, what do you think is behind this? And what are the factors within government control that could be used, or levers that could be pulled to address this?

Ms Elliott: I think we are concerned by it. It is not ideal. However, there have been a number of reforms that have been laid out: one, around inclusive education; two, around strong foundations; and now three, and most overall, the public school resourcing review. Rather than rush those reforms, it is important that we take the time to get those right. It is important that the reforms are resourced.

What we would all like to see is a system that is thriving and strong and working well—not just for students, but also for staff and the broader community.

The review tells us there is a lot of work that needs to take place, and some of that work will be an intersection of these different reforms—all of which are likely to have a really good impact in all of our schools. I think the challenge for us right now is how we get there and how fast we can work. And I think all we can do, as an organisation, is represent our members and say that parents and carers want to see some change.

They are sometimes quite realistic about the fact that we are not going to see a big, huge reform, all done next week or next year, but they want to see the system move towards more consistency and more equity.

And that is particularly important where we have got students who, in some schools, are forgoing access to a teacher more often than others.

So, there are a number of things that will happen if we can get these reforms in place. But I think, at this point, we are waiting very eagerly to see what the reform journey will look like and how quickly we can get something happening that does show a commitment to achieving the outcome and the purpose identified by the big reform.

Mr Judge: To maybe speak, not so much to reforms, but to simple measures that are within the ACT government's control: the daily experience of AEU members working in our public schools is that there are not enough teaching staff to cover all of their classes; there are not enough specialist staff to meet student need. It is not uniform across the territory—you would not expect it to be. There are some places where that is a problem more than others, but the overall experience is we do not have our classes covered.

If you had to think of the most basic requirement for running a school, it is that there is a teacher for every class that the school has to run that day. If we are not meeting that, it is all well and good to talk about reforms, but it is hard to imagine the effective implementation of them. We are not necessarily talking in terms of there not being enough teaching staff on a daily basis to do the things that are contemplated by reform work. We are talking about: there are not enough teaching staff on a daily basis to avoid regular splitting, collapsing of classes, regular periods of minimal supervision for students rather than learning.

That has to be addressed, and the ACT can address it by hiring more teachers. So, that is the thing that we would really like to see a focus on in the short term, while these reforms are being contemplated.

MR EMERSON: I suppose, to bring it back to the original question, families with a choice might choose a non-government school that has enough teachers as opposed to their local public school that does not.

Mr Judge: Noting that that choice would have to exist—I do not know what staffing is like in the non-government sector. But I think the fundamental issue there is the concept of choice. Private education is not a choice for everybody. There are families who cannot afford private education, so it should not be the case that we are asking people to make a choice between an education that involves having a teacher and an education that involves spending all day in minimal supervision.

MR EMERSON: Just on the “one public education system” approach that, Ms Elliott, is the big reform, and we have heard a little bit about from the government that this would have been hard to do without the resourcing review, because people would have pushed back on the idea of making a change to school autonomy. Is that your view?

Ms Burroughs: No.

Mr Judge: Look, I think the presentation of the reform as being about school autonomy is, potentially, a little bit—it opens the question of “autonomy as to what?” What is the autonomy that schools want, and what is the autonomy that they would happily give away? Things that we might present—

MS LEE: Like project managing rooms or something.

Mr Judge: Exactly. So, there are things about our schools that school principals find themselves having carriage of things—you know, the tray audits is a favourite example of the AEU’s—that you think could be done by somebody else who is not an expert educator. Those are the sorts of autonomy—you know, the autonomy over how the tray audit is conducted—that schools will happily give away.

The autonomy that we want, and that our members want and that I do not think the review particularly questions, is around educational decision-making. Experts in education and our best teachers and school leaders should make decisions about education. They should be supported in relation to all of the other aspects of running a school.

MR EMERSON: Less of the administration, right?

Mr Judge: Yes.

MR EMERSON: And do you know the view from the parents' perspective?

Mr Elliott: Well, from our perspective—and I guess I would say that I have been working with ACT Parents for nearly 10 years—our observation would be that, as an organisation, broadly, noting Patrick's comments about autonomy which are quite correct, we have been seeking more consistency for a long time because the experience of students and families varies far too much.

If we look a little bit more across the community, our experience would be that there was not a collective position around autonomy at a very basic level. And I think, where we are now in terms of the situation of 77 out of 92 schools being over budget last year, and the AEU's call for the review, were instrumental in achieving sort of a collective position across a number of different groups, including parents and carers, also AEU members and the principals association.

So, it is really important, I think, that there is that consensus. I think it is really important that the review sets out a number of challenges for the system that have to be addressed.

And I do not believe there is any real disagreement from the findings. So, I think that is a really good position to start a reform with. Everybody is on the same page. Now we need to do some more work together—and collectively, because, as stakeholders sitting outside of, sometimes, and adjacent to the system, or as users within the system, we do see and identify some of the challenges that are happening in our system a bit

better, and possibly some of the resolutions that might be available. So, I think, again, we can achieve more if we work together.

MR BRADDOCK: I have got some questions about disability funding, particularly in light of proposed changes to the NDIS that are coming. Firstly to ACT Parents, I just wanted to know if you had views in terms of the proposed changes to the NDIS and what that will mean in terms of the educational experience in ACT government schools?

Ms Elliott: Yes, we have some concerns around changes to the NDIS. One, that there has not been a lot of lead-in time to prepare for Thriving Kids; and two, we are still working out what Thriving Kids looks like, and will look like, in the ACT.

We are concerned about the gap. What happens when children are nine or older, and might have mild to moderate autism or developmental delay?

We are concerned about making sure there is enough money to be able to offer services to all of the children who need it. I think, we talk a lot about education funding but, really, how the government funds the community and community supports and community services that really is a point of intersection for families. And we need to make sure that we have the appropriate funding in our health, disability and community services to ensure that these do not become education problems.

Currently, students who do not have the right supports are showing up in class and in schools, and are unable to engage and participate in learning like their peers. It does create extra challenges for school staff who are already busy. So, we need to make sure that we can offer the best possible supports for our young people so that they can have a good time, they can enjoy their learning, but also so they go on to have a fuller lifelong experience.

MR BRADDOCK: A similar question for the AEU in terms of the impacts that may have on your workforce.

Ms Burroughs: I will make some comments, and then ask Patrick to supplement. At the moment, there is a resourcing review that identifies a deficiency in funding for students with disability, or for our specialist schools in particular. So, the unknown, moving into 2027, is particularly worrying from a baseline that is an independently acknowledged level of under-funding.

We share ACT Parents' concerns about Thriving Kids, and there is a large portion of our members who are particularly concerned that parents who might be receiving funding at the moment, for who that will be discontinued and transferred to Thriving Kids, will miss out. And that extra workload and support required will be, then, placed on educators of younger children. So, there are some real concerns and our branch council recently resolved to raise those concerns with the relevant ministers.

I say "ministers" because we do not actually know who we are dealing with—and it is happening in a minute, so our members have some very legitimate concerns about that future which is almost upon them, and the unknowns going into 2027 and beyond.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a clarification question because I understand the ACT government does have an implementation plan for Thriving Kids, but it is not publicly released. Have either of you seen a copy of that implementation plan?

Mr Judge: No. Look, the AEU has had to work very hard to attempt to get some consultation on Thriving Kids. I think there has been—perhaps describing it as minimal to date would be generous. We really have not been spoken to about how the government intends to meet the challenges that that will present to members, or engaged with to find out what those challenges will be. So, that is very disappointing.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you, Mr Judge.

Ms Elliott: I can say that we have had an opportunity to provide some feedback and some consultation in. It has been—it has existed. It has not been very long or detailed, and I think that is purely around the time pressures that everybody is under. And we look forward to continuing that, but I just would note that there has been a big challenge, I guess, for the ACT to work with stakeholders and community members when they themselves did not seem to have all the information they needed from their commonwealth counterparts.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Talking about hiring more teachers to lighten the load, perhaps, and make that so there are more teachers for the students: the national teacher shortage, is that contested as a concept? Is there a national teacher shortage? Or is there a teacher shortage only in the ACT?

Mr Judge: I think, firstly, we are not talking about hiring more teachers to lighten the load; we are talking about having enough teachers to cover the classes, to be really clear. So, that sort of basic level.

I think the heart of this question is: is there a workforce out there? Well, we hear that schools are fully staffed from the government. We hear from our members who are early in their careers that they know people who are registered teachers who are looking for work and not getting it in ACT government schools. And we hear from our principal members that they simply do not have the money in their budget or the approvals to hire additional staff to cover some of these gaps, or that they do not have a sufficient relief budget to hire relief teachers.

So, the question, to us, would appear to be more about whether the funding actually exists to hire a sufficient number of teachers than whether the teachers are available.

Having said that, it is very clear that there has been a shortage of teachers nationally, and governments all around the country have been taking steps to address that, including the ACT government.

The question, though, I think really goes to if a school today that does not have enough staff was looking to hire someone to cover the gap, well, we think that there are examples where the school would not be allowed to hire people within its budget, to cover those classes that students are missing out on.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: That comes back to the budget and, sort of, the SRS funding model. The other follow-on question from that, I am interested in from the other side of users, is: the reading that I have been doing suggests that the only fully funded to the SRS public schools in the national public education system are in the ACT, but it still remains—funding is still an issue. So, is that contested; that the ACT public school system is fully funded according to the SRS?

Mr Judge: No, we would not contest that the ACT is funded according to the SRS, but I thought—

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Fully funded.

Mr Judge: The question that our members, and I think anyone who is involved in the public school would ask, though, is, “Is it meaningful to say that schools are fully funded to the SRS if there is not a teacher to cover a class?” And we would say no, that is not meaningful to say. Unless there are sufficient staff to actually do the job of schools, it is no good to say we are fully funded to the SRS.

THE CHAIR: So, “fully funded to the SRS”, where is the discrepancy? If the SRS is—and pardon my ignorance of the standard—but then, there is no teacher in a class, where is the disconnect?

Mr Judge: I am not sure that we could answer that question. I just do not think we have the information to know why that is.

MS LEE: I mean, it is extraordinary that your members' experiences are that we have got schools in the ACT that do not even have enough funding to actually have a teacher in the classroom. I mean, that is extraordinary. How many schools are we talking? I know that you might not have it exact, but in terms of the feedback that you get, are we talking majority of schools? Are we talking a handful?

Mr Judge: We would have to take that on notice.

MS LEE: Just on that topic, if I can ask a question and sort of clarify it as another supplementary. Just while you are taking that on notice, if you can also—if it is available to you—in terms of primary school, high school, college. If that is possible? Thank you.

There was a report that was published yesterday, an Assembly inquiry in relation to the access to language education for year 11 and 12 ATAR courses. That painted a pretty grim picture in terms of language education here in the ACT, and I do not know if you have had a chance to read it—it is not too long, but it was only yesterday. Perhaps if I can get your views? I know that you both obviously appeared as witnesses so there are some of your views already captured in the report, but your initial responses, I suppose, in relation to the findings as well as the recommendations that have been made by the Assembly inquiry?

Mr Judge: The finding that I think the AEU was least surprised by, and think is most significant on a global basis, is the need for workforce planning—proper workforce planning. When the government says that it is going to deliver programs through

schools, whatever those programs are, it needs to plan to have a workforce in place to deliver them. And I think it is pretty clear that there have been some shortcomings there. So, that is our initial reaction to it.

Ms Elliott: Yes, look, we have had a brief read of the report, and I think we can say that there are no surprises in the recommendations that have been made. The report reflects the experiences that our students are having in the system. And, you know, one of the things that really stands out to us is the calls that support a more equitable delivery of service across the system—which is something we have been advocating for, for a long time.

MS LEE: One of the things in previous discussions about language education and access to language teachers has been, "We cannot deliver it because there are not enough language teachers", which goes back to Mr Judge's point about workforce planning. Has the AEU provided input to the government when they established and implemented the language education action plan? If so, has the government actually delivered on that plan, and, if not, where are the gaps that you can see?

Mr Judge: The AEU and our members did engage when the government developed the plan. It was some time ago now that that happened. I think, broadly, we were disappointed to see that the recommendations we were making were not taken up by government, by and large. So, although we had the opportunity to make some submissions, they were not received favourably.

MS LEE: Ms Elliott, ACT Parents?

Ms Elliott: Yes, we were consulted at the time, a number of years ago when the plan was being developed. The plan was published and I think one of the comments about that experience would be there was no secondary consultation prior to publication. It was published without any, sort of, knowledge.

And, you know, we were equally disappointed about some of the items in the plan that could have gone a little further and achieved a better outcome.

And I would just echo two things: that workforce planning and resourcing are incredibly important.

When we take a look at the public school resourcing review, we can see that over time the system has asked schools to do more and more things. And each of those things might have a small workload associated with them and, yes, that might be easy to do that one thing, but when layered with a number of things, a number of different reforms or new initiatives or new policy, you know, that has a really confounding impact and we need to be really mindful of that.

MS LEE: Absolutely. Thank you.

MR EMERSON: During the hearings, I think we had the government officials and the minister up after we had you up, and the minister indicated that she would not say that languages education was a priority right now. We have spoken about a range of different reforms, there is a lot going on, so I understand that, but it is also part of the

national curriculum. So, I wanted to get your take on whether it should be, among these reforms, a priority for the government ensuring—particularly what you spoke to, Ms Elliott—that equitable provision of continuous language learning pathways through the system from primary school through high school and college?

Ms Elliott: We find ourselves in a really interesting time because we are aware that some of our schools have really struggled to actually get teachers in front of students every day. When that is happening, I think our first priority, as a system, absolutely has to be finding qualified staff to be in classrooms, to make sure we can offer what would be a baseline expectation of an education system.

On some level, we also, as a community, need to have a conversation about expectations and what the things are that we might be willing to, as individuals—individual students, individual families, individual schools—what we might be willing to forego to make sure that somebody else, somewhere else, receives something.

I think we do have almost two very clear sets of schools in our public education system: the schools that can have and offer a lot for students; and the schools that are unable to do the same. It is not fair and it is not equitable, and without a huge amount of money and investment in the system we may need to re-prioritise.

Whilst we would all love for students to be learning a language because it is in the curriculum and it is important and it is a really great opportunity, along with lots of other things like music education and the arts and environmental science, it is also—you know, we want our kids to be able to learn to read and write, and we want them to have a teacher in front of them every day. So, the unfortunate reality is, yes, we probably need to have a think about, “How can we get teachers in front of classes every day?”

Mr Judge: I think the question of priority—to what extent is it a priority?—I understand where it comes from in terms of the decisions you have to make around staffing and those sorts of things but to some extent it is a bit of a false distinction around, you know, “Is this part of schooling more of a priority than this other part of schooling?”

Really, there are things that we are asking schools to deliver, and things that we are not asking them to deliver. So which category is it in? Is delivery of language education something schools are going to do, or is it something they are not going to do? So, when we say it is not a priority or it is a priority, maybe, in a comparative list of things, there are things that we are more urgently concerned about—like getting enough teachers to cover the classes. But really, it has to fit into one of those categories.

So, if the government is saying that we are not going to deliver the language education programs that we are supposed to be delivering, that is one thing. If they are saying we are going to deliver it, then let’s deliver it.

MS CARRICK: I know the school resourcing review is going to take time to implement, but I am interested in the short-term here and now. So, when it comes to

equity of not having enough teachers, are there short-term measures that the directorate is taking to shuffle teachers around to where the greater need is?

Ms Burroughs: I think that process is evolving. And, at about this time of year, school leaders are engaging in those sorts of discussions, but they cannot do that without their budget allocation for 2027 and they do not know that yet. But the expectation is that, from next year, some of that smoothing of the inequities will commence.

MS CARRICK: Okay, so it is more of a structured thing as opposed to a more day-to-day thing that, you know, "This school is really down. Can you just send some from the next school over?" Like, maybe even within the district: "You have got some here, can you send them over?" There is not that level of flexibility?

Ms Burroughs: That does happen to some extent when it is possible, but it is really tricky. But recently, because of the different learning environment that college students experience than high school students, some college teachers were asked to go and fill some desperate staffing situations in some nearby high schools. So, that is an example of that adjustment being able to be accommodated at very short notice.

MS CARRICK: I just have one more. It is the Strong Foundations plan: recommendation five was the screening of students, and recommendation six was tiered support. I am just wondering, apparently the screening is happening in the phonics, year 1; and there is screening happening this year; and tiered support is supposed to kick in next year, 2027; do we know if that is progressing? Or is that stuck with the broader resourcing review?

Ms Burroughs: I understand that it is being piloted in some schools at the moment. So, my expectation is, following a pilot, you would implement.

Ms Elliott: Yes, and I can confirm that we have had some engagement on that, around the pilot. I understand the pilot is occurring now and expecting implementation to happen next year.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. I think we are just on time. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof Hansard. Thank you so much for your time.

Short suspension

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

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

As we are not taking opening statements, I will now proceed to questions, as will the committee. I would like to talk about the missing middle changes that were implemented this week. These are changes that are designed to deliver hundreds or even thousands of additional dwellings in the form of dual occupancies, townhouses, terrace homes and units in the suburbs. I know that you have broadly welcomed those changes, but you are also sceptical of some of the outcomes we want to see from those changes. I want to find out what your pessimism about the outcomes is. Why are you not optimistic?

Ms Berry: It is important to say from the outset that we need these zoning changes. That is the crux of our support. We have a system where you can only deliver one home on over 80 per cent of the residential land here in the ACT. Having it zoned RZ1 is inefficient. It is not good use of our land and it is not going to provide sustainable housing supply for the territory moving forward. We are absolutely supportive of the zoning reform. What we would like to see the government do is go further with the tax and regulatory changes that surround missing middle housing. That would be the crux to actually get these homes delivered.

As part of the budget, the ACT government have announced remissions on the lease variation charge. We have said from the start that it is going to be one of the barriers to delivering missing middle housing, because, every time you want to add a dwelling, it costs a minimum of \$46,000. It depends on what is actually in your lease, but it is a minimum of \$46,000. The government have halved that as part of this budget process, but only for RZ1 and RZ2 zones. This is where our, as you called it, pessimism or scepticism comes from, because that ultimately relies on mums and dads, everyday Canberrans, sitting around their kitchen table now that this has passed and saying, “Can I put another dwelling on my block of land? Do I want to? Do I want to have two or three? What other obligations am I going to face, such as developer licensing, if I decide to have three?” We think that, from mum and dad developers, we will get a lot of dual occupancies around Canberra, if they decide to do anything at all, particularly when you have RZ1 and RZ2 as the zones where LVC remissions apply.

What we would like to see with those remissions is a broader conversation about LVC, particularly for missing middle housing—that those 50 per cent remissions would be extended to all residential zones. If you are delivering a missing middle product, then you should be eligible, because at the moment we have the situation in some suburbs where it is zoned RZ3 on one side of the road and RZ1 or RZ2 on the other side of the road. You could now theoretically deliver townhouses on both sides, but one will have the benefit of 50 per cent less LVC and one will not. That is the challenge, and that is why we are concerned that it will not take off straightaway.

THE CHAIR: RZ3 land is owned by the clubs. Is that right? Who owns RZ3 land?

Ms Berry: It could be. It is probably more corporate developers. It is not necessarily clubs. It may be, but I would say it is my members who are corporate, professional developers who do development as their business. They would be more inclined to be the ones that either hold or purchase those RZ3 sites.

THE CHAIR: So, if you do not have the same rules applying across the board, you would see an uptake of mum and dad buyers in RZ1 and RZ2 zones, but you still have locked land zoned RZ3, for example, which could deliver more homes if that reduction—

Ms Berry: Remission.

THE CHAIR: remission applied to them as well?

Ms Berry: Absolutely. Those we would call professional developers who do this for a living can deliver at scale. They can deliver broader development on RZ3 blocks, whereas on RZ1 and RZ2 blocks—

THE CHAIR: It is only one or two.

Ms Berry: We would like to see more. There are opportunities for block consolidation and block amalgamation. There are a lot of opportunities. There are some big RZ1 blocks around Canberra where you could actually build six to eight townhouses quite easily, but it is about who is going to take that risk and what tax remissions are applicable.

THE CHAIR: Ultimately, what you are saying is that if, for example, your members were to deliver missing middle housing in the RZ3 areas, they would still have to add on the costs to the building because they have to make money.

Ms Berry: Yes. LVC would still apply at full freight and, make no mistake, that is ultimately put onto the cost of construction, labour, government charges and the cost of the land. Then you add the developer's margin on top of all of that, and that is your sale price. The developer's margin is getting smaller.

THE CHAIR: Why do you think that the LVC delivered only 60 per cent of what the government had initially anticipated?

Ms Berry: I cannot remember the last time that the government's projections actually matched. It is hard to predict, but it is significantly short each and every year, and that is because development feasibility in the ACT does not stack up. The government predicts that there will be X amount of development that attracts the LVC payment, and quite often, when proponents get their LVC estimate or they work out what it is going to be, it tips their feasibility completely over and they cannot get bank finance or they cannot proceed.

THE CHAIR: It is not a viable project.

Ms Berry: It is no longer viable.

THE CHAIR: There are conversations to be had about LVC in general, but where would you land the forecasts of LVC charges if you were the government?

Ms Berry: It is difficult to forecast it. We would like to see it go completely, but I appreciate that the government has a different position on that. There is some work that the City and Environment Directorate is starting to undertake, in terms of looking at what the LVC could be and engaging with industry, which is positive. We just need that to happen sooner rather than later because, for every week that we still have the LVC regime in place as it is, there are people who are doing viability assessments, feasibility assessments, and, when they come back in the red, they take their capital and their investment to not just other types of assets in Canberra but also out of Canberra.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MRS MORRIS: What are some practical LVC changes? Obviously, your first desire would be that the government got rid of it all together, but, short of that, what would be some of the changes?

Ms Berry: One thing that they could do is look at simplifying the codification. At the moment, there is a rate for every suburb around Canberra. Trying to work it out is huge. There is a disparity. It is maybe \$40,000 in some suburbs and close to \$200,000 in other suburbs, and that is based on the value of the land, but that needs to be simplified. That is the first part. The other is taking into account all of the work that developers often have to do as part of their development approval—offsite and onsite works. You cannot offset that. That is another challenge because you are being hit with a tax on a perceived value uplift. You also have to pay a lot to actually get to that value. The third thing is time. These assessments need a standalone development application, and that takes months to be approved. There is no engagement with the Valuer-General. There is no ability to fast track, get some feedback and get things moving. Then, if you still need to go down the ACAT process because you disagree with the value that they give, it takes another 12 to 18 months, so you can be looking at two years.

MRS MORRIS: Does that timeframe add to the costs to—

Ms Berry: Every delay. Every day that you are not actually constructing something or getting a finished product adds to the cost. There is extra interest and there are holding costs that, ultimately, the end purchaser wears. It needs to be factored in.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR EMERSON: I want to ask you about activity in Civic. On their website, the government have a business partnership policy for ACT government major projects. It outlines how the ACT government may partner with nearby businesses during the construction phase of major projects to minimise disruption to the greatest extent possible. If you look at the criteria, it is obvious that what is happening with light rail would fit within that. I only found out about this because one businessperson told me about it. I do not know that many are familiar with it. Are you familiar with this

policy? Have you heard anything about this policy document from any of your members?

Ms Berry: I heard anecdotally that there was going to be a policy, but I do not believe that anyone that I know has taken it up. I do not know the details of it. I do not know if it is applicable to property owners or the tenants. I assume it is to support the businesses—hospitality, retail, cafes—to try to help them. But, overall, there has been insufficient support for local businesses that are impacted as a result of light rail.

MR EMERSON: Are you aware of any government policy focused on addressing commercial vacancies generally, but especially in the CBD? If not, do you have any ideas?

Ms Berry: We have lots of ideas on how we can address what is a growing problem here in the city. The Property Council does an office market report every six months. In February, CBD office vacancy was 12 per cent. Canberra-wide it is about 10 per cent, so it is edging up. You can compare it to Barton, which is 1.2 per cent, which is probably no surprise. We are about to release our next round of data, in early August. I have not seen it yet, but, as of 1 July, I am expecting the city vacancy data to be a lot higher. That is as a result of, essentially, public service departments either moving to Barton or consolidating their footprint, which you can understand. That is an efficiency requirement. You can understand why they are doing that. But, as a result, a number of buildings in Civic will be empty or are empty now and were not empty last week. We already have a growing problem of antisocial behaviour and unsafe behaviour, and we have a lot of commercial vacancies. Just from a ground-floor perspective, if you walk around, there are “For lease” signs in far too many buildings.

We proposed, as part of our budget submission, that the government needs to look at how you can activate those commercial-floor vacancies in particular and look at reducing the LVC red tape and burden. That is not about a revenue issue; that is just about the time that business owners need to go in. Say it is zoned for an office, but a physio wants to go in, but, because it is not particularly on the lease that you can have a physio in there, you need to make a lease variation application, wait for it to be assessed, and then you can get someone in. Meanwhile, the physio has found other premises. We have proposed that it needs to be an administrative process. Even if there is a fee, we need to have an administrative process. I believe the government will look at that as part of this LVC framework review, but we think that is something that should be done sooner rather than later, because that is a good way of enabling both landlords and tenants to get in. That will fix some passive surveillance issues. It will not fix all of the problems.

We need a strategy to get people into Civic. I think that there is a fair amount of support for getting more people to live in Civic. I have not heard too many reasons from anyone yet as to why we would not want that. It is close to public transport, it is close to amenities, and there are buildings and land that are probably right for that. But, again, how we fix that comes down to LVC, planning and heights. If we have people living in Civic, and we know that a lot of our population works from home, at least a couple of days a week, there will be people activating the precinct, which is what we need. We need people walking around and we do not have that anymore.

MR EMERSON: Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK: The government's goal was to enable 30,000 more homes by 2030. The MBA said the government is about 1,350 homes behind schedule. Do you share that view? And do you think that 30,000 figure is achievable?

Ms Berry: I am a glass-half-full kind of person most of the time, believe it or not. I think there are opportunities for us to get to 30,000, but we have to move quickly. From the data, if you look at completions, we have been tracking well for the last two years because there was a big boom in approvals in 2022-23. It looks like we are doing some good things. I have the numbers here. In 2024, we had only 2,179 dwellings approved. That is significantly short of the 6,000 we need approved every year, and you need them to be approved as quickly as possible. Then you need the financial settings and the viability to still be there—that is, no escalating Middle East crisis, no other wars, no product shortages and no changing tax systems. Then you need to get them all built and assume everything goes to plan. It is a hard task. We can do it. Is it possible? Yes. Is it going to require industry, government and international settings to all go in the same direction? Yes. I think we will struggle to get to 30,000.

Will we meet our federal government National Housing Accord? That is for only 21,000, so that is fewer. That is probably more achievable, but we need to do everything we can to not just hit a target for the sake of hitting a target. I think that is also a key point. We need to release land, particularly here in the ACT with the Suburban Land Agency controlling land release. We need to release land that people actually want to buy and can afford to buy. That is key. We currently have 2½ thousand apartments on the market across Canberra. That figure is about a month or six weeks old, so I am hoping that a few have sold, particularly with the stamp duty changes that came in; hopefully that is generating some more activity. They are brand new, no problems, ready to move in, completed, yet we are still continuing to release sites. We still hear from people who want homes but either cannot afford apartments or do not want apartments. We need variety, and at the moment we do not have that. That needs to be factored into the 30,000 target.

It cannot just be a target for target's sake. We could release blocks of land and say, "You can fit 1,000 apartments there," but you could only do that if they are one-bedroom apartments. We need to be sensible about this and think about what people moving to Canberra want and what people here in Canberra want if they are right-sizing—if they are looking at moving from an apartment to a standalone home, a townhouse or a terrace. We need to have diversity. That is a key part of that land release program and actually delivering the homes.

MR BRADDOCK: Amongst your figures, you gave approvals. Do you have the numbers for construction commencements and construction completions for housing?

Ms Berry: I do not have construction commencements, but I do have completions. There is a gap between what has actually been approved and what has been completed. Over the last 11 years, 4,327 dwellings have been approved but not completed.

MR BRADDOCK: Interesting.

Ms Berry: That is from January 2015 to the end of last year. That has not changed much. If you move that period of time, it sits at around 4½ thousand to five thousand. I am really intrigued. We have data coming out next week from the ABS as to how it is moving, given the current economic climate.

MR BRADDOCK: Are you saying that probably the key thing the government needs to look at is getting the right mix of land and type of dwellings? Do you have a Goldilocks mix that you would refer to?

Ms Berry: No. I do not think there is a Goldilocks mix. It is about making sure that we have services in place, that we have transport plans and corridors in place, and that we are not developing in a piecemeal style. We need to have variety. It needs to be a mix of standalone dwellings, terraces, townhouses and apartments. I am not a town planner, but there is a right mix, and having one or the other is not the answer. We need to be mindful from an environmental and social perspective. We do not want the urban sprawl that we talk about. It is about how we still give people the amenity and the lifestyle that they want.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Why do you think that over 4,000 homes have been approved but not finalised?

Ms Berry: Most of the time it is because they no longer stack up financially, and that is for a range of reasons. It could be that approvals took longer than expected. It could be that, particularly around COVID but also around the latest fuel crisis, people expect that costs will be X and then they end up being X times two. Here in the ACT, there is no ability to rely on sunset clauses. Particularly for off-the-plan purchases, once a contract is exchanged, a developer is locked into the price. It can be quite difficult. Their option is to either proceed and lose money or not proceed, and neither is a great solution.

THE CHAIR: With 2,500 apartments, they could say, “There are a lot of apartments on the market. Why would we add to that market when we are not going to—

Ms Berry: That is one of our main concerns. If there is so much stock on the market, not only will new entrants say, “Why would I add to that? It is not good commercial sense,” but also developers and builders who own those apartments cannot get more finance or they do not want to take on additional risk. We are hoping that the stamp duty changes that came in as part of the budget—to remove stamp duty for new unit title properties—will give a bit of incentive and create some demand so that people will start their new project, because that helps the construction industry and keeps the economy going, and that is really important.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MRS MORRIS: What impact are the current tree laws having on being able to deliver 30,000 new homes?

Ms Berry: Trees are a considerable issue for development, particularly for missing middle housing. Where missing middle housing would work really well is in our older, more established suburbs where there are larger blocks and probably a number of trees in the back yard. We are not saying that it should be an open public realm. Having a good tree canopy is necessary and it is really important, but the current tree laws are inflexible. We have heard stories about trees being on certain blocks and it taking 14 months to get approval. It stalls projects for 14 months to remove a tree.

It is not about removing all trees; it is about making a system work and having faster response times so that people can actually know what they are able to develop—that it happens quickly. There is a review underway now of the urban forest legislation, and we will be pushing hard that the paramount consideration needs to be how we can get the balance right between protecting the environment and delivering enough homes—not causing undue regulatory burden, because at the moment it is an undue process that takes time.

MRS MORRIS: Is that deterring potential investment in building in Canberra? Is it turning people away?

Ms Berry: Absolutely. It is one of the additional barriers and additional bits of red tape. When people are looking at investing and building missing middle housing or doing any sort of development, they will be deterred from blocks that have certain trees, depending on what their plan is, because of the time and the rigmarole.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Werner-Gibbings.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My questions were about the variations, and that has been answered very well.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Mrs Morris.

MRS MORRIS: Thank you. My question would follow neatly from Mr Emerson's. The Property Council noted in their pre-budget submission the need for city activation and that disrupted precincts understandably reduce economic activity and confidence. We are hearing a lot of widespread concern about safety in the CBD, antisocial behaviour, acts of violence and graffiti. Could you tell me what concerns your members might have regarding antisocial behaviour in the city and dysfunction in the CBD, and whether that has an impact on the future of the property market in the city.

Ms Berry: It absolutely does. It has been an issue for a while, but it has certainly increased over the last 12 to 18 months. Members who are either the property managers or the owners of assets throughout Civic report that their tenants hear concerns from their employees about coming into Civic and coming into the office, because of the increasing number of homeless people that have nowhere else to go. The housing affordability issue is one thing. This is another part: what services are we able to provide as a society? There is a whole lot of work.

You had social services here earlier, the YWCA and others, but this is from a safety perspective. It is probably a perceived safety perspective, to be fair. I do not have statistics on assaults or anything like that, but it is a perceived safety perspective.

There is a perception that, with increasing homelessness and increasing antisocial behaviour, people will choose not to come to the office or they will not want to stay at the office after 5 o'clock. Previously, people may have stayed until 5 o'clock and then said, "Let's go for a walk" or "Let's grab a drink" or "Let's go out for dinner," but now they think, "I'm going to get out of here before it's dark because I don't want to walk back to my car later" or "I don't want to catch public transport later. I just want to go home." Those are the kinds of things that reduce the foot traffic.

It is all a bit of a cycle. If you have fewer people doing that, the people sleeping rough or the people who are engaging in antisocial behaviour are going to stay around because there is no-one stopping them. We know the police are doing a blitz at the moment. It will be interesting to see whether that has a positive impact, but there is a real concern about having people feeling safe when coming to work, which is really important, but also having people feeling safe enough that they can walk around, use the open space in the public realm, go to the shops and go to the cafes—actually utilising those businesses—because, without that foot traffic, you do not get passive surveillance; it just gets worse.

MRS MORRIS: Do your members have a view on how they would like that antisocial behaviour to be dealt with?

Ms Berry: It is in two parts. It needs to be dealt with by a mix. It depends on what the cause is. Police are not the answer for everything and sometimes can exacerbate the problems. It needs to be a multifaceted, coordinated approach between charities like Vinnies and the police, where it is appropriate. That is one part of it—dealing with the emerging issues. The other part is that we need to get more people around—have people actually utilising the open spaces, utilising the buildings, and having ground-floor tenancies, whether they are businesses like coffee shops, hospitality or retail. Having businesses there rather than vacant shopfronts that end up being graffitied and vandalised is going to help because people are less likely to trash a building when it is actually being used. It is about getting shop frontages active and getting more people into the city.

We have continued to raise our concerns about working from home. The government have made their position clear, both federally and locally, that there will be no mandate to return to the office, but working from home is still an issue because people are not coming in and the buildings are not being utilised as much as they could be and should be, which then impacts hospitality, retail and so on. So how do we get people living in the city? That is going to take some time. That is a challenge, but that is what we need to look at.

MRS MORRIS: Thank you.

MS CARRICK: You mentioned the 2½ thousand empty apartments. I have spoken to an executive committee of a tower. They said that 20 per cent are owner-occupiers, and the rest are, assumably, investors. Can the LVC and the code incentivise developers on the stock they build?

Ms Berry: We can design a system that works like that—absolutely. We need to go through the numbers, but, to me, we need an LVC system that works, and, if that

means it is around the types of homes and trade-offs from a height perspective and trade-offs with other things, then that needs to be on the table. We will certainly bring that up as part of the review that the City and Environment Directorate are doing.

MS CARRICK: Do you think there is a bit of a mismatch? We keep talking about activating the city, but Woden is going to have over 10,000 apartments and nobody cares about activating the 20,000 people who live there. So it seems to me that there is a bit of a mismatch by putting apartments in the suburbs and the town centres and saying, “We want the city activated.”

Ms Berry: We need to be able to chew gum and walk at the same time. For me, the city, as the nation’s capital city, needs to be not like it is at the moment. We need to put importance on that. We are the nation’s capital. We need to make sure that we have a city befitting of that. That is probably the push from a city perspective, but we cannot leave our town centres behind, because they are a really important part of the satellite city that is Canberra, and they could be economic hubs. They are residential hubs. It is about how we get it all working. There are smart people in this city and in this room. We need to be able to do it.

MS CARRICK: I agree. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. We are on time. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any question or notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you very much.

Hearing suspended from 3.05 to 3.31 pm.

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

NAIK, MS SMERA, Policy and Training Officer, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings of the Select Committee on Estimates 2026-2027. We welcome witnesses from Mental Health Community Coalition ACT. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. My first question is around the review of the budget. Do you believe that it delivers the investment needed to address the gaps in prevention, early intervention and community supports?

Ms Kelly: Thank you for the question. We still see that there is a significant gap in the funding allocation specifically to the prevention and early intervention end of mental health. We note that 90-odd per cent of the budget is still going to Canberra Health Services for the delivery of acute mental health, tertiary mental health and forensic mental health care. While some of that includes early intervention and prevention, certainly the vast bulk of that is responding to acute and enduring mental illness. We also note that there has been nearly a doubling of funding to community NGOs in the last seven years or so. But, again, that is largely about demand management and filling service gaps as opposed to actually looking at that prevention and early intervention end.

We are still calling for and asking for an investment of between five and 10 per cent of the overall budget, which is around \$30 million, for prevention and prevention-based services and looking at that in a really broad sense around how we start addressing the services or the spaces we need to prevent people from becoming unwell in the first place—not just when people become unwell. We are really interested in things around third spaces, for example, or places where people gather; how we reduce isolation and loneliness in this town; how we fill some of the functions of local council in terms of doing activities and engagement of people in their local spaces; how we make sure there continues to be green spaces as we start developing and building the city out so that people can still see, feel and be part of nature and with nature; and how we make sure people have the basics like a home—not just a house but a home—a sense of belonging, income, food, safety and security, so that they are not actually draining onto their mental health.

With early intervention services, we continue to call for investment into the implementation of a brief distress intervention model from Scotland that addresses people who are struggling with daily life issues like relationship issues and issues at work and are struggling with the things that happen in life and looks at how they can connect with others to problem solve and feel connected and supported in a way that helps them resolve the issues they are facing without needing to become a member of a service system or a consumer or to be diagnosed with a mental health condition in order to be able to get the support that they need. We think there are some really great

models, particularly internationally, that would work really well in a town like Canberra, given our size, our closeness and our jurisdiction.

THE CHAIR: I know you have touched on this a bit, but can you please elaborate a bit more on the significant gaps you are seeing right now with the service provision model?

Ms Kelly: We have gaps around what is known as social prescribing—how people can connect into a service system, be supported and connected into community and engage in community without having to come through a medicalised system. It is probably the biggest gap that we are seeing at the moment. What we have done is push and force people through a GP into a diagnosis, into a psychological therapeutic model, and then into recovery. What we are seeing is this very large gap in service provision that prevents people from having to go through that model, in that not everybody needs a psychological therapeutic intervention. So we are looking at gaps around social inclusion activities and around community development activities—around the social part of psychosocial.

It is not good enough that we have a system that says, “People’s needs are met because they have now got a support worker who is paid to take them to a coffee shop.” What we need are communities that wrap around people, yes, and we need investment to build those. They do not happen on their own. One of the biggest gaps I think we have at the moment is investment in community development workers, who actually work within community, who meet community need, who build mum’s groups, coffee clubs and book groups and those sorts of things that build connection with people and enable them to feel as though they have support and prevent them having to go through this very medicalised model of mental health care.

THE CHAIR: The government has recently announced that library times will be cut. I know that libraries are one of the effective ways people socially interact. You would think that something as simple as that would go towards that prevention and social supports.

Ms Kelly: Absolutely. We need the third space concept, and libraries fall into a lovely third space. I think what we keep missing is that we actually need to invest in professionals or workers who then drive that. I am thinking about the Connect Up program.

Ms Naik: Connect Up 2617.

Ms Kelly: Yes; thank you. It has been piloted and showed some phenomenal results around how you connect people, particularly university students, in residential blocks to start building connections with each other. That project only works, though, when you have a paid worker who is doing the work and driving it. It does not need to be long and sustainable; that worker can go in, do it and come back out once it is set up. But we get to invest in that. So we have a library, but we do not have a community developer to build it and connect people.

THE CHAIR: A facilitator.

Ms Kelly: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Is Connect Up 2617 still going?

Ms Naik: I think the pilot is still running. It is being run by UC, University Canberra, and they have the Health Research Institute that has done the research on it.

Ms Kelly: The pilot has finished and is now being continued through Capital Regional Community Services in Belconnen. But what we do not have is funding to replicate and duplicate. It started as a research project through the university. They had this idea of, “Oh, what if we did this?” and got a research grant to trial it and test it and went, “Wow, this really works,” and Capital Regional has picked it up to continue in the building that it was started in. But what we do not have is funding to replicate it and duplicate it.

THE CHAIR: Across the ACT.

Ms Kelly: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Interesting.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a couple of questions. The first is on that 10 per cent figure that you utilised. On what basis did you come to that particular percentage in the interest of implementing?

Ms Kelly: There is quite a bit of research, and People like Prevention United, EverMind and some of the big research spaces in mental health have quite often come back to going that that 10 per cent investment, as being an initial figure, will be enough to stem some of the upstream flow. The idea is: how do you invest enough at the front end to start making an impact on the number of people accessing through the acute service delivery? Ultimately, our end game is to stop people going into a bed. So that 10 per cent is coming through the research as the figure of investment level.

MR BRADDOCK: Do you know what the increased prevalence and economic cost of preventable mental health issues in the ACT would be?

Ms Kelly: No. There are figures around, and I could pull out figures and I could tell you figures but, in that question, we are assuming there is this linear line that says, “If I do this, then this”—which is a lovely economic world. Unfortunately, in human services, to draw that straight line can be near impossible. For some people, this intervention will stop them progressing to acute but, for another person, it may not. Also, is it that single intervention or is it a whole bunch of things working together that actually makes the difference for someone? We are just about to release a report on the economic costs of psychosocial supports, and I would be happy to provide that report once it is public. But, having seen some of the drafts of it, it will also say that trying to put that figure in is near impossible. That is why we come back to, “Let’s go for a 10 per cent investment and see what track that makes in terms of acute presentations.”

MR PARTON: I am going to quote from your submission. You say:

Psychosocial supports are not optional extras. They are essential, community-based services that help people build relationships, manage daily activities, and participate meaningfully in society.

You have also pointed out in your submission that nearly 80 per cent of people who are requiring psychosocial support are missing out. You must tear your hair out. That sounds like the sort of figure that you would expect in a third world country and this is the capital of this leading Western world nation. How do you get your head around that as someone who is so pivotal in the space—because it is not really acceptable, is it?

Ms Kelly: No, it is not. I think it is the by-product of a number of things. It is the by-product of an overly medicalised push around mental health and that the funding and the service models for mental health traditionally have been led by psychiatry and have been pushed into a very medicalised model with some psychological therapeutic support around it. What we recognise and realise is that, actually, it is people's day-to-day living support that makes the difference in wellbeing. I can have a mental illness and be incredibly well. I can have a mental illness and be incredibly unwell. What we are looking for is how we put into place the things that keep people well, regardless of whether they have a mental illness or not.

MR PARTON: We have already spoken about this here in this room that people experiencing a mental health crisis are often referred to the emergency department because it is the only option available. Do you believe that greater investment is needed in community-based crisis support services that operate outside the hospital setting?

Ms Kelly: Absolutely. We believe that the hospital is a tertiary health service and should be providing tertiary health supports in the mental health space. We believe everything else is better run through community and through NGO community-based services provision, simply because we actually have more agility and flexibility, but it is also a place where people are more likely to engage. We think that the hospitalised model of care works for people who cannot keep themselves safe—and that is not just what mental health crisis looks like. For some people, a mental health crisis will look like, "I cannot keep myself safe," and for some people, it looks like, "I need someone to talk to."

So we would like to invest more in safe spaces or safe havens. We would like to investigate more around emergency diversion activities and how we actually have services and places in place that prevent people turning up to an emergency department, which is not often well equipped to support somebody who presents with mental illness either. I would also say that psychosocial unmet funding is also problematic because of the nature of Australia. So it is a joint funding problem through the NDIS, through the commonwealth and through the states and territories.

MR PARTON: Thank you.

MR EMERSON: The National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement was recently extended to 30 June next year, and the ACT and federal government

bilateral expired, I guess, three days ago. Have you been involved at all in informing those negotiations? What are the sorts of things that you hoping to see show up in the agreement?

Ms Kelly: Yes, we have been consulted and involved in conversations with the directorate and with the minister's office on what we think should be in the agreement. We are looking for a visionary agreement. I am not sure how visionary it will end up, but we are looking for a visionary agreement. We think the Productivity Commission review into the previous agreement was quite scathing and pointed to some very strong conclusions that need to be in the agreement. So we are pushing for that. For us, that will include things like specifically calling out prevention and calling out suicide prevention—not as intervention but as prevention—and what role whole of governments play in ensuring that people are not becoming suicidal and are not experiencing life circumstances that might drive suicide ideation.

We want to see more coordinated care across the states and territories, but we also want to make sure we have place-based service delivery. One of my fears of the national agreement is that what we end up with is federally instigated programs and activities run by the commonwealth. That does not meet what we need in the ACT. Often we end up with duplicative services and with services not place-responder, because it is being driven by the commonwealth. So we have been pushing quite hard to go, “Actually, there needs to be place-based decision-making here and we need to address the unmet psychosocial need”—that the agreement cannot be passed and cannot be finalised without strong agreement, including financial agreement, into meeting unmet psychosocial need and not just the psychological end of that. Our other fear is that it will go into an increased Medicare system, for example, of increased psychological visits, when what we are actually looking for is investment in that very strong social end of mental health and inclusion of carers and consumers in the decision-making around their care and treatment.

MR EMERSON: Are there places that are doing this well that say, for example, “We are here in the mental health session and I suppose we are going to have the minister up later in the hearings and then it will be in the mental health session with the rest of the health officials.” How do we actually go about saying, “If we are going to have responses to distress that are not just medical, that might involve sport and recreation, which is another portfolio, and it might involve planning, which is another portfolio”? Is there anywhere in the world that is really getting that sort of thing right?

Ms Kelly: No, but I think some places in the world are doing better integration across government and across social determinants. Again, we would probably point towards the Nordic-type countries, where you see in the results that their wellbeing levels are really high, their happiness levels are really high and where there is much more sense of community that is going on in those spaces.

I think what we are lacking in the ACT is that we have the Wellbeing Framework but we do not actually have a way of integrating that framework into the delivery of services. I still do not think we have mastered the way in which we translate that into funding and budget decisions either. It is fine to increase housing, for example, and go, “We have met the housing domain,” but if we do not include wraparound care support and case workers and support workers for people who have been homeless, providing

the house will not change the circumstances. We tend to do this thing where we invest in one spot and not think about what else is needed to provide that support across to provide the best success possible in one space over here. So, for me to be able to maintain that home and that tenancy, I also need some income support. So where is the support for that going into that home as well? The piece I think we are missing here is how we look at a problem from multi-dimensions and solve it, not in a budget bucket. We talk about the frustration of people. My frustration is that we continue to solve things in budget buckets or to someone's portfolio, rather than going, "This problem actually cuts across multiple portfolios; so how do we draw from all of them to address the problem in a more coordinated way?"

MR EMERSON: I want to go back to the question about the agreement and your kind of advocacy as part of that consultation process. With mental health, suicide prevention and other issues—and you have touched on homelessness—we hear about a lack of help-seeking behaviour and also that services might be available that people are not connecting with. Sometimes that is used as a reason to say, "The government is trying,"—or the sector is trying—"and we are providing services but the person on the other side is failing to connect with them." Is that part of your advocacy in changing the mentality and saying, "No; actually it is your responsibility to outreach and make sure the services are connectable."?

Ms Kelly: Yes. One of the things we are working really hard on at the moment is changing language. Let's stop saying, "What we want to do is increase help-seeking behaviours." It is crazy language. It puts the responsibility on the consumer and the failure on the consumer. If we start saying, "What we want to do is improve help responding," it becomes a system and a problem of the system in how we respond to people who need help or who are asking for help. How do we create a service system where at six o'clock at night I can say, "I am making a phone call and asking for help," rather than taking a day off work to have to connect with the service that is only open between nine and five? So I think we need to do some big shifts. We are really pleased to see in the strategic investment plan, for example, for the mental health commissioning bucket that there are outcomes now around what the system needs to change, rather than what the consumer needs to change. I think the more we can do that, the more we will see some really better outcomes for people and put the blame back on the system and services for not responding properly.

MR BRADDOCK: Roughly, what percentage of mental ill health in the ACT is related to gambling?

Ms Kelly: You have the questions today, don't you?

MR BRADDOCK: I do.

Ms Kelly: I would have to take that one on notice.

MR BRADDOCK: Are you aware of any linkages between gambling and mental ill health and the role gambling plays in making that worse?

Ms Kelly: Yes; absolutely. We have actually just released a position paper on our views around gambling and mental health. I do not have the figures committed to

memory; so we can get you those figures. But we do know that there is a very strong link between mental illness and mental ill health and gambling in both directions. We know that, when people have experience with depression and anxiety, they will be drawn to gambling and that they will engage in gambling activities and behaviours. We also know that, when people feel really isolated, they will head towards a club and engage in gambling and that then increases their sense of isolation as well, oddly, but also then contributes to depression and anxiety. Then we know there is no money—and that contributes. So, yes, gambling and mental health almost go hand in hand. It would probably be near impossible to find somebody who has a gambling problem that does not also have some form of mental health condition as well.

We would strongly urge that the government needs to seriously consider gambling advertising. We are increasingly concerned around the number of young people who are starting to engage in gambling behaviours and what impact that will have on their mental health and their life trajectory. We are concerned about non-traditional forms of gambling. I think in this town when we talk about gambling, we think about poker machines and, while the Mental Health Community Coalition would absolutely agree with the abolishment of poker machines, we are not thinking about online gambling, gambling that happens in games and electronic games and within spaces where we are encouraging kids to be and they are being flooded with the idea that gambling is fine and it is an okay thing. So, yes, it is definitely an issue.

MR BRADDOCK: So those with mental health concerns are more susceptible to gambling advertising?

Ms Kelly: Absolutely.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Ongoing investment in purpose-built mental health facilities has already been mentioned. Noting what is in this budget, what are the next steps over—for want of a better term—the forward estimates? From your perspective, what will be the most important next steps for mental health facility budget allocations?

Ms Kelly: While we have invested in mental health facilities, I would say we have invested in residential bed-based facilities. The next priority for me would be a co-located building for mental health services where a multitude of services can operate from the one space.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Like a services hub type—

Ms Kelly: Like a services hub, yes. There is one in Tasmania called the Peacock Centre.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Does co-located mean that the services are next to—

Ms Kelly: No, inside—in one building. We were talking before about help seeking and help responding. What happens currently is I turn up at a service and, if it is not the right service, I am told I need to go somewhere else, which means I need to get

my car and I need to drive somewhere else and go somewhere else. In that time, I am going to talk myself out of it and not follow through. What we actually need is one space. We have talked to previously about a walk-in clinic, for example, that is just dedicated to mental health and where we could have people who are doing social support, people who are doing therapeutic support, people who can engage with carers and support carers, a social space for people to be and a range of different services so that, when I walk in the door, I am not getting told that I have to walk back out the door and, rather, in that hub, I can find the service that meets my need at that moment and I can engage with that service in that hub and get what I need from that.

We would also support that that also would include respite accommodation—so overnight or over two or three nights—for people who need somewhere safe to spend some time away from their normal family or their normal home because they are either escalating and need somewhere that can provide that support or the carer needs a break. It could be an alternative accommodation option for PACER, who often will talk a lot about not having anywhere to take people once they have de-escalated them in community. That would be my next structural investment in mental health.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Excellent. Thank you.

MR PARTON: Lisa, as you are aware, the Canberra Liberals are committed to introducing a suicide prevention bill in the Assembly this year. In your budget submission, you referenced the New South Wales model. What components of the New South Wales model would you like to see replicated in the ACT?

Ms Kelly: We like the idea of a whole-of-government response to suicide prevention. What we do not want are action plans that are just about each single department doing something. What we want to see is: “What is government going to do across directorates and across portfolios?” The view of the New South Wales bill around holding suicide prevention as a whole-of-government responsibility with a whole-of-government response is the part of that particular bill that we like. South Australia’s bill, for example, in comparison, tends to hold each directorate responsible, rather than looking at the whole-of-government being responsible. That is why we referenced New South Wales particularly.

MR PARTON: When did your organisation first lobby the government for a dedicated suicide prevention bill?

Ms Kelly: This would be the first time we have put it in a formal submission.

MR PARTON: Okay; thank you.

MS CARRICK: I am curious to know your view on safe havens? There is one in Belconnen. There was to be one in the Canberra Hospital, but that did not go ahead. Would they be in the hubs that you just have been referring to or based in the community—like in the town centres or wherever—as opposed to at a clinical place like the hospital? What is your view on having more safe havens?

Ms Kelly: We have a strong view that we need more safe havens and more safe spaces. Often what we look for in mental health is one sort of thing that is going to

work and this cookie approach of, “If we land this, we are going to fix it for everyone,” and we forget that mental health is as broad as the community is and what will work for one person may not work for the other. We think we need safe havens in community. We think we need safe havens in co-located spaces. We think we need safe havens at hospitals and that people will use those in different ways to achieve different outcomes. It is not just a simple matter of saying, “Let’s just have this one that sits in one way.” We know that, for the majority of people with mental illness, a non-medical intervention is what they are looking for. At the moment, most of our intervention sits in the more medical space, particularly from a hospital perspective. We would like to see a diversion at the hospital grounds so that people who are turning up there have somewhere else they can be supported, but also in community.

MS CARRICK: When you talk about non-medical solutions, third spaces and connecting community—and I love all that stuff that you saying—I assume that indoor sports stadiums, street theatres and arts centres, where like-minded people can come together in their community, can help build that community and keep people connected to like-minded people.

Ms Kelly: Yes, absolutely. That needs to be supported, though, with stigma and shame reduction as well. Having all of those facilities, having spaces, having sports fields and all of that, helps greatly with my connection. But, if I feel like I am turning up and being judged or I am going to be stigmatised or my shame is going to be activated, I am not going to come. So it is both: we need to build the third spaces and the community centres and the sports grounds and all of the rest of it, but we also need to be campaigning strongly around how we talk about mental illness, how we look to people in mental illness and what we think are the values of us as a community around inclusion.

THE CHAIR: Unless there are any other burning questions, we will wrap it up. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you so much for your time today.

Short suspension

LAMB, MS JESSICA, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Health Care Consumers Association

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

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. My first question is around outpatient reform and planned care. Your submission identifies improving access to outpatient services and planned care as one of HCCA's highest priorities. Do you think that government has invested significantly in reforming outpatient services and expanding the community-based model?

Ms Lamb: I think investment has started, and they have certainly done some great work on enhancing patient throughput in terms of access to planned procedures and surgery. I think there is a lot more work to be done in terms of doing that same work for outpatient clinics and other types of appointments.

THE CHAIR: Based on your review of the budget, how much of this will be allocated to public housing and community housing, and for the private sector? Do you have a breakdown of how that allocation would happen across the sector?

Ms Lamb: Can you ask that question again?

THE CHAIR: Based on your review of the budget, how many of these will be allocated to public housing, community housing, and for the private sector? Do you have a breakdown?

Ms Lamb: Housing? We are talking about planned care?

THE CHAIR: Yes. Is there an allocation for public housing? Doesn't that fit into the public housing stream as well?

Ms Lamb: It does not relate to housing at all. Planned care would be for healthcare access to outpatient services, elective surgeries and other procedures. It would not necessarily relate at all. Access is not different, depending on what level of housing you are accessing.

THE CHAIR: Did you say it would be different depending on the level of housing, or it would not apply at all?

Ms Lamb: It would not be different, no. The triage process for access to planned care does not relate to your housing situation or your socio-economic situation. It is first on the list, triaged against your clinical need; then first on the list, first off the list.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Emerson?

MR EMERSON: I want to ask about bereavement and miscarriage care, to see whether you have views on this. This is something that has been raised with my office.

Grieving parents have reported traumatic experiences at North Canberra Hospital due to having to give birth and receive post-birth treatment in the maternity ward following a still birth or miscarriage where, obviously, they are surrounded by newborns. Has this been raised with you, and what is your understanding of best practice care for parents going through this kind of awful experience?

Ms Lamb: It has not been raised with us recently. I know that Canberra Hospital has a much better set-up, in terms of access to rooms that are very specifically designed to cater for this, to separate parents who are experiencing bereavement from the general populace of the maternity ward, so that they have close access to their baby after birth and they can stay there for as long as they need, with access to a cooling cot, separate rooms and space for family to come and visit. That set-up is ideal, and it would be great if North Canberra Hospital had something that was equivalent, to enable them to provide that same level of care for families there.

MR EMERSON: Some other jurisdictions have a dedicated recurrent miscarriage clinic, so that they can provide specialist care when parents are experiencing recurrent miscarriages. I understand that Canberra families have to travel to Sydney for testing and that kind of care. Is this something that has been raised with you? Do you think the ACT should be delivering some kind of specialist service like this, as happens in other jurisdictions?

Ms Lamb: It is not something that has been raised with me, but I do think it is something that we could very feasibly provide here. We would have most of the expertise that is needed to provide that care appropriately. I cannot see that it would be specifically and precludingly expensive for us to provide it here. It does, again, require consideration of where and how you provide those services. You cannot put it in the outpatient maternity clinic. That is a very difficult thing for people to be dealing with. But there are community facilities that we could probably use quite effectively to provide a service like that, even if it was a matter of having visiting clinicians periodically. There are lots of different ways of structuring it. I think that could be a very valuable service to have.

MR BRADDOCK: I have some questions on palliative care, Ms Lamb. Firstly, in your 2025-26 budget submission last year, you said Clare Holland House was only funded and staffed to operate 21 of its 26 beds. Are you aware of whether that is still the case, or has that changed?

Ms Lamb: I am not necessarily aware of whether or not that is still the case, but I will be very happy to take that question on notice and come back to you about that.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you. You advocate in your latest submission for the 24/7 telehealth and virtual support model for palliative care patients in the ACT. Is this model used in other jurisdictions or other countries? If so, what have been the outcomes of such a model?

Ms Lamb: It is used. I could not speak specifically to the outcome of those models, but there are certainly models out there, and ones that have been evaluated. I would be happy to provide some of those evaluations. It does a very good job of avoiding palliative patients needing to present to the ED out of hours, which is what is

currently the case. It avoids getting hospital-acquired infections and taking on risks that are associated with that. They also get specialist advice related very specifically to their palliative circumstances, rather than going through the ED.

MR BRADDOCK: In terms of the provision of the full scope of palliative care in support of voluntary assisted dying, do you have any concerns or views about how that is going in the ACT?

Ms Lamb: No. It is important, if you are offering voluntary assisted dying, that you are also offering top standard and very accessible palliative care. I think we are moving towards that, particularly with the impending opening of the new palliative care ward at Canberra Hospital, and it is important to be able to use those spaces for patients who are seeking voluntary assisted dying, alongside palliative care. People need to have those choices available to them all the way along the process. At the moment that seems to be working relatively well. I have not heard anything specific since the introduction of voluntary assisted dying that suggests that it is necessarily a problem.

MR PARTON: Your submission recommends expanding community-based programs such as GRACE, RADAR and Hospital in the Home, together with establishing a dedicated subacute care pathway for older people. Does the 2026-27 budget provide the level of investment needed to expand those models of care, and what impact does the current level of investment have on consumers and hospital capacity?

Ms Lamb: I would say that the 2026-27 budget does not necessarily do much to expand the availability of those services. We think it makes a big difference to consumers to not need to present to hospital. It avoids hospital-acquired complications, infections, delirium and all sorts of things, in particular, for older people.

Also, we have a significant number of older people stuck in acute hospital beds at any given time. That is detrimental to patient flow through the system, and people needing acute beds cannot get acute beds. It also means that those patients are not receiving the care that they need to rehabilitate, have the social supports that they need and move back into the community outside the hospital. It is important that we have a pathway for that. It is very difficult; obviously, with the interaction with aged care, it is not under the control of the ACT government. But the health system needs to have a solution, and I do not think we have one currently.

MR PARTON: In your view, are those programs that we have just touched on now proven enough that they should become core health services rather than relying on incremental expansion through successive budgets?

Ms Lamb: Yes, I would suggest that they should be. We receive a lot of very positive feedback about those services. People really value those services in the community. I think there is a lot of scope for looking at the inquiry into the ACT health system data, demand and processes, and its suggestions for looking at ways to reduce the need for people to present to hospital. While some of those services are proven, they are established and they are avoiding presentations to hospital for vulnerable people, I think there is a lot of scope to expand those as core services.

MS CARRICK: Do respite services play a part in improving care for older people?

Ms Lamb: Yes, they certainly would.

MS CARRICK: Do you have any views about how they could be delivered?

Ms Lamb: No, I do not, but we have just been talking about a subacute care stream for people in hospital moving into the aged-care system, and I think there would be scope to consider whether that service is able to do respite as well, if it is a subacute ward or a different subacute environment. I know that in South Australia they set up something in a hotel, so that patients who were discharged were receiving nursing and allied health support and care in that non-hospitalised environment, before moving on to either residential aged-care homes or, for some of them, back into their own homes.

There is certainly a lot of scope to consider what that model might look like. We do not have it currently, so we are not wedded to anything. We know that Burrangiri is a problem, and we need to figure out what we do about the service that it is currently providing in the long term. This is an opportunity to consider how these two services might fit together and achieve economies of scale, and make those services available to the community.

MR EMERSON: From a consumer's perspective, what sorts of inefficiencies are there? Where could we be saving money in the health system, where we are seeing duplication of effort? It is a financial problem; it is also frustrating for people accessing health care. What opportunities are there that you think the government might not be grasping?

Ms Lamb: I think there is a lot of opportunity to use the services that are available within the community sector, where there are established expertise and support systems in place, particularly for people experiencing chronic conditions. There are a lot of condition-specific support groups out there. Some of them have their own clinical staff available for people to access and receive care in the community. They do home visits.

There are all sorts of opportunities to better leverage those services. They can often be provided more cheaply than they can in the acute care system. They have very specific expertise on those conditions, which can mean that people get better quality, more substantial education on managing their own condition. They get support to manage their own condition in the community. There are lots of opportunities to refer people who have presented into the public health system and have received care for a condition which they now need to manage on an ongoing basis to be sent back to the community sector, where they can receive the support they need to manage their health better, and avoid deterioration or re-presenting to hospital.

MR EMERSON: Do you think that is where the breakdown is? Say, from the public system, you are generally referred to a GP. Of course, we have the normal GP wait times and, if people do not have a regular GP, the GP might not refer on to that community-based support.

Ms Lamb: Yes. There is a role for GPs to play in referring people to those services as well, but we are also aware that GPs are pretty pressed. It is hard to get an appointment, particularly immediately after you have been discharged from hospital. There is not an appointment available tomorrow, even though you might need it, and it is not free to go to most GPs in the ACT. That is a cost for people as well.

There is a role for integration of these services, and for the public health system to recognise the benefit to patients of services that are out there in the community, and perhaps better resource those services to meet increased demand, if they are referring people out to them.

MR EMERSON: As opposed to having people continually bumping into the acute system but potentially not getting the ongoing support that they need.

Ms Lamb: Yes; they are not getting the ongoing support they need to manage their health in the community.

MR EMERSON: Which might be more expensive, anyway.

Ms Lamb: Yes, so they keep re-presenting to hospital with issues that could have been avoided, potentially.

MR PARTON: The Health Care Consumers Association has certainly indicated in the submission that it supports reform of outpatient services. This is a really broad question, Ms Lamb. If you could identify one reform that would make the greatest difference for consumers waiting for outpatient care, what would it be? What magic wand would you wave? What would you implement?

Ms Lamb: One reform? That is a hard ask.

THE CHAIR: How about we do two or three?

Ms Lamb: I think there are a few different things that I would say are significantly important. One is looking at different modes of delivery, different models of care—using virtual care, community-based care options, those sorts of things—so that more patients can be seen more efficiently.

There is also a role for how we look after people while they are on the waiting list. Even if we are operating super efficiently, and we are doing so much better in our access to planned procedures, for example, people are still waiting, and they will still have to wait. How are we looking after people on the waiting list? How are we communicating with them regularly? How are we being transparent about how long they will have to wait, and what their other options are? And how are we supporting them to best manage their health in the interim, while they are waiting?

I am thinking about things like the GLA:D program, where people are supported while waiting for knee procedures, which increases their quality of life while they are waiting. It also improves their outcomes after surgery. There are a lot of different ways of doing that sort of thing. I think we need to be more conscious of what we are doing. Allied health perhaps is a contributor to that; there are all sorts of options for

how we look after people better, while they are waiting for the acute service for which they are on a list.

MR BRADDOCK: My question is about ambulance fees. There has been some media reporting today of the bill shock that people suffer from ambulance call-outs. Have you had any feedback in terms of whether the current cost of ambulance call-outs is preventing people from calling an ambulance when they need one?

Ms Lamb: I have some anecdotal stories around that myself that consumers have shared with me. I could not tell you what the pervasive sentiment is in the community, but I could certainly ask my colleagues, and they would have a better idea than me. Some of them work on ambulance-related committees and things like that.

I have heard from an individual who very specifically chose not to call an ambulance when it was probably very much warranted, because he was really concerned about receiving that bill. There is not a lot of communication with people about options for payment of those bills, what it is actually going to cost them, and what their choices are if they receive an ambulance bill that they cannot afford to pay. I do not know what the solution is to that, but I do believe there is concern in the community from people who do not have money to spend on an ambulance trip. It is about how we support them.

I know that the hospital is considering a transport arrangement with Uber medical, which can give some training to Uber drivers to transport chronic conditions patients, for example, to and from hospital. There are other options for transport, but I think we need to make sure that people do feel that they can call an ambulance when they need to call an ambulance.

MR BRADDOCK: Just to clarify, have you heard of negative health outcomes from people who have been afraid to call for an ambulance, due to the fee?

Ms Lamb: I have not heard of negative health outcomes that have happened from that, but I could certainly imagine that that could well be the case, if people delay too long or choose not to call.

MR BRADDOCK: Uber medical: I am finding that to be a mind-boggling idea. Can you please explain what that is, in 30 seconds?

Ms Lamb: I do not know enough about it myself, but it is a system that is operating elsewhere. You might need to Google that.

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you; I am doing it now.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, we thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide them to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you.

BOWLES, MS NICOLE, Chair, Community Sport Alliance of the ACT

BRADY, MR MICHAEL, Executive Officer, Community Sport Alliance of the ACT

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

As we are not taking opening statements, we will now proceed to questions, if that is all right with you. In your submission, you indicated that you would like the government to establish a representative body for all ACT sporting groups. How do you see this body working differently from ACTSPORT, which previously existed?

Mr Brady: That is an interesting question. It has been 10 years or more since ACTSPORT was in existence. Our group has been together for seven or eight years in an informal capacity and has been pushing for a representative entity probably since the 2020 election. The fact that significant stakeholders within the sector believe that there should be an entity suggests that there probably is a need. How that need is fulfilled needs to align with contemporary requirements, understanding that, subsequent to the pandemic, a lot of things have changed in terms of society, how government interacts with society, and how industry peak bodies represent their sectors. Certainly, from the group's perspective, it is about collaboration. It is about trying to find synergies with how government can operate and providing an opportunity for a facilitator to get government to understand the needs of the sector, and, conversely, the demands on government in terms of having to deliver a full suite of services to the community. From that perspective, myriad issues are a challenge for the sector in articulating those to government. That is probably the main priority.

The group understands that it is in a position of some privilege and opportunity because there are a number of paid staff and a large number of participants. From that perspective, it wants to lead in a collaborative way, understanding that a disparate and diverse sector requires it. I am probably not answering your question directly, but it is about how we go about setting something up that meets contemporary standards. Whether that fits with the previous model is irrespective of the needs and aspirations of the group. If it sort of aligns with what happened previously, then so be it, but I suspect that time has moved on.

THE CHAIR: It would change significantly.

Mr Brady: Yes.

THE CHAIR: The question that comes to my mind, then, is: do you see your group transitioning to the peak body or preparing yourselves if the government takes on this project?

Mr Brady: That is not an unreasonable question. The model that we are pursuing—and correct me if I am wrong, Nicole—is that representatives from the existing membership would sit on a board, but there would probably be a number of independent candidates as well sitting on the board to provide different perspectives.

That is how I guess we would see the model operating. It is difficult to attribute time to those sorts of things without being able to consult with others more broadly, but we certainly want to put on the agenda that we think that the sector is crying out for advocacy to be undertaken on behalf of the entire sector. This group is well placed from a resource perspective to facilitate some of that transition to a more formal entity.

There has certainly been a significant amount of goodwill dedicated to advocating, understanding that, whenever you advocate on behalf of others, your interests have to take a back seat. The group's members have been pretty good at understanding that a broader picture is at play. That is where we see things. We have not provided you with a model because we think that is all part of the process that needs to be followed—offering the broader sector some opportunity to consider what would be ideal in terms of representing the sector.

THE CHAIR: You said that ACTSPORT has not existed for the last 10 years.

Mr Brady: Yes—since 2015, I think.

THE CHAIR: If the group existed, what are the sorts of things that it would have advocated for, or where could we see the strength of that advocacy that we are not seeing now because that group was—

Mr Brady: That is a good question. Certainly, one of the things that we have pushed for for a long time is a long-term infrastructure plan. We think that would be of benefit in terms of giving some level of certainty to the sector about maintenance programs, renewal programs and, obviously, new field developments, understanding that there has been expanding participation over that period of time. That is fundamental to what most sports need: an understanding of where they can participate. There are a number of other factors at play. You have clubs that are providing facilities. Private schools provide facilities as well. It is a broad remit from that perspective. Some sports require access to public school facilities as well in order to conduct their business.

It is interesting that the Local Government Association are having their conference here at the moment, because they have been pushing for a greater level of funding across the country for municipal services. We would see that having a long-term strategy in place would place the territory well in terms of going to the federal government and saying, “We have an overarching plan in place,” and seeking greater federal government funding, in terms of the provision of municipal services. We think there are some internal aspects to it, as well as the external aspects to it.

MR EMERSON: Have you received some feedback as to why a representative body was not funded in the budget?

Mr Brady: We received notification about what the government is undertaking. By virtue of that, we understand that we have not been successful. We understand that, by putting forward a submission, we may not be successful the first time around, but we are certainly continuing to ask government to have a greater level of benevolence about it.

MR EMERSON: We can push government on it. You can ask them for benevolence. I am curious about your understanding of how government funding is actually allocated to different sports facilities and so on. Is it based on participation rates, growth potential, capacity constraints or something else? Do you have any idea?

Ms Bowles: My understanding is that, for the majority of funding for sports, we go through a categorisation process every three years, and then we are able to access some grant funding from the ACT government. Outside of that, we are looking at facility infrastructure investment and those types of things, which are asked for on an ad-hoc basis and individually looked at, as to how we can go about that. Then they are either put in the budget and successful from their submissions, as a standalone item, or worked into a different cycle. That is what we understand the process to be.

MR EMERSON: We have the budget submission process and there are ongoing grants processes, and obviously they impose a bit of an administrative burden on organisations like yours—smaller organisations—and also the government. A lot of it looks ad-hoc to me. Do you think that is problematic? Are there are other approaches that could make it less problematic?

Mr Brady: Our members understand that there is a need for a level of accountability in terms of expenditure of public funds. The realm is: do you become an agency of government by acquiring funds from government or are you at liberty to maintain business as usual and deliver the programs? We understand that all sports provide community services. If they did not do it, then who would? That then becomes a question of: what level of administrative burden needs to be in place in order to fulfil accountability requirements? For small organisations, if the government has an expectation around certain programs being delivered, how do you then resource that in a way that does not create inflexibilities for programs that are currently operating? That is the balance that governments need to understand when seeking to provide this sort of funding to small organisations.

If you look around jurisdictions across Australia—all of them—for whatever reason, they seem to demand more and more from the not-for-profit sector in the disbursement of public moneys. That is the broader conversation that needs to take place: what are government expectations around the not-for-profit sector—in our case, the sports sector—in delivering services to the community? That is one of the things that we are talking to government about, both in a specific way and in a broader way.

Ms Bowles: Coming back to your earlier question, that is where having its own independent body can help the sector through that, so that we can help volunteers and smaller organisations navigate and support them through the admin burden and some of the things that are being asked for, so that government has accountability regarding where funds are going, but not at the detriment of smaller organisations or volunteers. We are there to help them support each other through the processes that we need to undertake.

MR EMERSON: That is what I was going to ask regarding the representative body and also the longer term plan. Obviously, there is an administrative burden once you have received a grant, but there is also the process of applying in every grant round

and perhaps not knowing why it did not get up this time. Regarding your budget submission, they are saying that you did not get the representative body this time, but maybe next time. Everyone is competing because there is no plan. You could see some efficiencies that could be gained. I am sure there are also organisations that make one proposal and then say, “Well, we didn’t get it. We won’t bother again,” and fall off the map.

Ms Bowles: Yes; definitely. The more that we can create much more longer term sustainability as to how sport is delivered here in the ACT is our aim as an organisation, to make sure that the capability and capacity of not just our infrastructure but also our volunteers and our human resources that go into delivering sport are sustainable through an evolving society. We know that the way that sport is delivered now is not the way it has been delivered in the past or will be delivered in the future, so how do we, as a sector, keep making sure that we are adapting and evolving, and not letting people drop off but come along the journey with us?

MR BRADDOCK: Do you think those decision-making processes are fair and transparent at the moment or can they be improved?

Mr Brady: I am sure that everyone has their own case study with which they could answer that question, Andrew. It would be poor of us to speak on behalf of everybody, but we can give you the email addresses if that helps you. Sometimes, when you are not successful with things, you wonder whether it is worth it, or, when you being asked to do things outside your remit, sometimes you think it is not necessarily fair.

MR BRADDOCK: That is very diplomatic, Mr Brady. In your budget submission, you note that increased operational expectations are placed upon sporting organisations by government and constituent participants, and that varying relationship models with respect to national sporting organisations means there is less scope locally to address gaps in government policy. Could you please outline for me what that increase in operational expectations placed upon sporting operations looks like for your organisations and volunteers.

Ms Bowles: For example, we have just gone through a categorisation round, and we talk about the load and the information sharing that needs to happen. Smaller organisations need to make sure that we have good governance practices happening across all of our organisations, making sure the paperwork is done and providing that paperwork from that side of things. As you know, sport is not a one-size-fits-all scenario. Some organisations are more centrally run; others have a more federated model. Regarding the categorisation process, you fall into one of those two buckets. It is either easy to fill out because you have a local perspective and are able to put a local lens on it or more centralised sports do not and it lands on their national bodies. They are looked at differently, based on how they operate internally.

Mr Brady: To add to that, on the ground, there is more and more overlay of responsibility that sits with community clubs, in terms of public safety, participant safety, respect, and understanding the wellbeing of all of your participants. That sits at a level within the community. There are always reporting requirements and frameworks that you have to put in place, on top of trying to provide opportunities for

people to participate. It is another level of responsibility that the community sometimes expects, but the community does not realise the work that needs to occur in order for that to transpire.

MR BRADDOCK: I have a question about the government's sports facilities audit. Have they engaged you at all? And what does that look like, if they have engaged you?

Mr Brady: As in the motion put forward by the—

MR BRADDOCK: In terms of the government, as part of responding that motion. I thought it was about engaging with the local sporting community. I want to clarify whether that is actually the case.

Mr Brady: We have had some conversations with government—yes.

Ms Bowles: Yes. They engaged with us at the start of the process to seek our feedback and understanding about what the motion put forward and what it could potentially look like. We have had a couple of meetings with them to help them navigate through that from a sector perspective, but we have not had anything formally communicated back in terms of that.

Mr Brady: If we can put our perspective, the thing about the audit is that you get a body of information, but what do we do with that information? That is what we are pushing for from a long-term plan perspective: let's have an outcome following on from that audit.

Ms Bowles: Yes. And we are trying to help government too. Some of our organisations do that stuff themselves already and they are fully across what an audit of their facilities looks like. We have said, "Hey, we can expedite this process for you. We have this information. We're here to help. Just let us know what framework you need and we'll put the information to it."

MR BRADDOCK: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: How long ago was that initial meeting?

Ms Bowles: That was at the start of the year, very soon after the motion. It was towards the start of the year.

Mr Brady: Yes.

MS CARRICK: I appreciate that all the sporting groups put their views about their needs, their wants and what have you, but who actually looks after places like Molonglo, which does not have any tennis courts or a skate park or decent playing fields? They are going to have very scaled back playing fields at Stromlo Forest Park, but they do not have a good, centralised playing field. Who looks after them? Is it the government's role or your role? It is like it slips through the cracks. The government relies on you guys to put forward what you think your needs are, and they will often go with that, but who looks after the community as a whole?

Mr Brady: We should have got you to answer Chiaka's question at the start! That is one of the things that we are talking to government about: the whole consultation process for planning. A view that is certainly held within our group is that you find out that this is what you are dealing with, rather than: "Can we have a broader discussion around how urban planning takes place? And for what purpose do you want community facilities to be part of that urban planning?"—rather than retrofitting or placing sporting facilities at the tail end of things because you have perhaps been able to maximise land sales. From our perspective, we are asking, "Maybe you need to look at the whole setting of urban planning and where the facilities and community assets need to sit in order for a new community or an existing community to engage with each other." We are asking to perhaps reverse engineer the process and include significant stakeholders at the start and scope it a bit so that there is an opportunity for genuine input into how it all looks, rather than saying, "This is what you have."

MS CARRICK: Maybe we will come and see you about the Molonglo town centre, because that is being planned at the moment and—

Mr Brady: We are not a representative entity at this point, Fiona!

Ms Bowles: Leading on from that, that is where, as a representative body, we would take the lead in making sure that those things happen and come together, and we would be able to talk on behalf of the sector—

MS CARRICK: And integrate the community.

Ms Bowles: Yes—as opposed to being just individual sports and looking at it through our individual lenses.

Mr Brady: We would of course back-end that by saying, "Be careful what you wish for."

MS CARRICK: And who makes sure that we get good outcomes? We might have the private sector ticking the box in the development, like Scentre Group putting some basketball courts on top of DJ's loading zone. Who ticks it off and says, "Yes—that's a great outcome for the community"?

Ms Bowles: That is where we work hand in hand with the community, with the government and with the sector, by asking, "What's the best outcome, and what does this look like?" as you, as members, do and as the government does—"How do we work together and get that feedback and engagement so that, as projects come online or we're endorsing projects, we have a roundtable vision of what things look like?" As you all know, you are not going to please every person within the community, but it makes sure that you are doing the right consultation and checks and balances along the way, to make sure that you are getting the best outcomes possible.

MS CARRICK: That is interesting. You might find the Woden community thinking that the 25-metre pool in a little splash area between a tower and the fence for Melrose Drive, invisible to the community, is not a great outcome, and tennis courts on top of DJ's loading zone is not the greatest outcome. There are things slipping

through the cracks and communities are suffering. They are losing their amenities. For example, the Weston Creek Bowling Club is another one, so what is the role of clubs? They own community facilities and recreation facilities, like the Weston Creek Bowling Club. That is another one that is going to be lost. Do you guys have a view about the role of clubs in all of this?

Mr Brady: You probably should have got the clubs here to talk to the committee. Any time you lose a public asset, it is a loss to the community. From our perspective, we would like opportunities for all Canberrans to participate in sport, regardless of what that sport is. I imagine it was a business decision by the club as to what was feasible. As we all know, the club sector is under increasing pressure to diversify its revenue stream, and I guess they are some of the difficult decisions that need to be made about how you perpetuate your existence, understanding that the core purpose of your existence is a millstone for you financially.

MS CARRICK: Yes. Where clubs own the amenity is a major issue for the sports and recreation sector.

THE CHAIR: Following on from that question, in the previous session we heard the Mental Health Community Coalition talk about investing in prevention. One of the social determinants of prevention is sporting facilities and sport in general, but, at the same time, we have the ACT government's budget announcing a \$700 million pause in pipeline infrastructure. I wanted to get your view of how you see that affecting new suburbs and new builds for community sporting facilities.

Ms Bowles: It is a sector that is already under a lot of stress and strain regarding facility infrastructure, whether it is new, coming online or repairs and maintenance of existing facilities. Hearing that as a sector really makes us concerned about what the future looks like. Again, without a 10-year-plus infrastructure plan about infrastructure priorities, it makes us question what is next. How do we move forward? How do we, as sports, plan for our growth? And where do we need to look at putting investment and volunteers or building our own capacity and capability? That is definitely a question that we now need to ask ourselves as well, in terms of how this looks for us.

To Fiona's point, government is not the only possibility that we can lean on to gain access to infrastructure, but it is definitely a key driver in town, so how do we make sure that we are having conversations across the board—not just with government but also with the private sector, developers and ClubsACT—to make sure that we have sustainable infrastructure into the future?

THE CHAIR: That is really good. Thank you. The obvious aim from the budget papers is to focus on what the Chief Minister indicated: focus on all parts of Canberra and existing projects. Do you have a sense of whether projects include uplift to old sporting infrastructure, for example?

Ms Bowles: The minister has written to us and said—

Mr Brady: It outlined the commitments they have made for the upcoming budget year. There is a lot of renewal and upgrading of half a dozen existing facilities, I think. Was there not?

Ms Bowles: Yes. Focusing on lighting is a key part for the department to improve long-term accessibility for longer hours and those types of things. That seems to be a key project. Obviously we welcome that investment for the community, but, as we said, what is repairs and maintenance versus significant investment into the future?

Mr Brady: Other pre-existing projects co-exist with that commitment as well. It is not as though they are the sole commitments that the government is making for the sector. There are other projects that have been in the pipeline and continue to be developed.

MR EMERSON: Do you think we need some more staff doing field and sportsground maintenance? We have seen so many issues, especially this year. Do we need a few more people in that area?

Mr Brady: This is not necessarily something we have talked about as a group. From our perspective, it would be ideal if you had a minister that was solely dedicated to sport or an office outside of the bureaucracy that is dedicated to sport. That would be a fantastic component of it. Sport is co-housed in a number of sectors, and we think that creates its own challenges, in terms of getting some coherency when putting priorities for the sector on the table. To answer your question, it would be ideal, but we seem to be in financially straitened times, aren't we?

MR EMERSON: Yes.

THE CHAIR: We will wrap it up for the day. 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*. On behalf of the committee, I thank witnesses who have assisted the committee through their experience and knowledge. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard staff for their support. If a member wishes to ask a question on notice, could they please upload them to the parliamentary portal as soon as possible, but no later than five business days from today.

The committee adjourned at 5.01 pm