



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
ADMINISTRATION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2024–25](#))

Members:

**MR J MILLIGAN (Chair)
MS F CARRICK (Deputy Chair)
MS C TOUGH**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2025

**Acting secretary to the committee:
Mr A Walker (Ph: 620 74843)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

APPEARANCES

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate	52
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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.30 am

Appearances:

Barr, Mr Andrew, Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

Leigh, Kathy, Head of Service and Director-General

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

Robinson, Mr Peter, Executive Branch Manager, Policy and Cabinet

Gillman, Mr Craig, Chief Executive Officer, City Renewal Authority

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. We have a full room today for this morning's morning session of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration and its Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2024-5. We are joined by Mr Andrew Barr, Chief Minister, and the directorate and officials.

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 contribution that they make to the life of the city and the region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

This hearing is a legal proceedings of the Assembly and has the same standing as proceedings of the Assembly itself. Therefore, today's evidence attracts parliamentary privilege. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the Assembly. The hearings are being broadcast and recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being webstreamed live.

We will not start with opening statements. We have an hour for this session.

Mr Barr: You do not want to hear me talk for 59 minutes?

THE CHAIR: No, not really. It is, sadly, a good tactic.

Mr Barr: I will resist the temptation then.

THE CHAIR: Yes, resist the temptation. I will start off. As a whole of government, are there any guidelines for community and engagement for ministers when they go out and consult?

Mr Barr: So in an official government capacity or in their role as members of the Assembly?

THE CHAIR: Their Official government capacity.

Mr Barr: So in relation to a government project?

THE CHAIR: Let's start with government project.

Mr Barr: Sure, yes. We do have a set of community engagement guidelines that do set a range of criteria around delivering an effective minimum time for consultation. We have a process and a dedicated community website called YourSay. We have regular surveys as well as project-specific engagement. So perhaps the easiest way to answer the question might be that if you are interested in the detail rather than me reading it out we can provide that for the committee.

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THE CHAIR: Take it on notice.

Mr Barr: So I will take the substantive detail on notice and provide the committee with some examples of the range of consultation guidelines that we have.

THE CHAIR: Are there any budgets that are allocated in terms of when they do go out to consult, or does it depend on the project?

Mr Barr: To a certain extent there will be funding associated with individual projects as well as a baseline capacity to maintain a website and a small team within Chief Minister's directorate who have a central whole-of-government role. Then within each ACT government directorate there would then be capacity for community engagement and communications. That will obviously vary given the size of the directorate and the extent to which it is regularly involved in community engagement. But, again, if it is helpful I can endeavour to provide a snapshot of that for the committee.

THE CHAIR: Yes, that would be useful. Is it recorded anywhere as an overall budget spend for each directorate?

Mr Barr: There would be a level of detail there. We will see what we can do to disaggregate that. You are interested just particularly in the community engagement side?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MS CARRICK: Chief Minister, I guess we have different views about the balance of ambition for the city and the town centres. So acknowledging that, my constituents have had concerns about a number of issues for many years, so I would just like to get a short response for them. On governance, you have talked about the fact that cities do not succeed by chance and require design, governance and collaboration. So why don't the town centres not have an entity like the CRA to undertake holistic planning and develop place plans and invest in activity in the town centres?

Mr Barr: The town centre functions are performed within the City and Environment Directorate. There are district plans and quite detailed elements within the territory plans for each part of the ACT. There can also be, as is the case, particular project or district-related taskforces, such as there is for Woden at the moment.

MS CARRICK: For Woden, where in the district strategy would it identify a place plan as to where is the entertainment precinct, where is the activity, where are the

community facilities? Where would I find that?

Mr Barr: I will take that on notice for you. We may be able to get an answer inside this session. Obviously it is not in my portfolio; it is in someone else's, But I will endeavour to find that for you.

MS CARRICK: Who organises things? Who does the collaboration? Who looks after the activity?

Mr Barr: I am not entirely sure I understand the question, but it is certainly the City and Environment Directorate—

MS CARRICK: But they don't.

Mr Barr: It has a range of functions and they are chairing an interdirectorate working group as it relates to Woden. But there is not an equivalent of the City Renewal Authority for every town centre, that is correct.

MS CARRICK: But nobody does that sort of thing that looks at the place where the activity will be. Nobody does that. There is a gap.

Mr Barr: That is the principal work of the City and Environment Directorate and the planning authority that sits within that directorate. But if you are talking about place managers, in that instance, no, there is not. But a lot of the place management in those precincts would be managed also by the private owners. So, for example, in Woden and Belconnen, the Westfield Group does a lot of programming and place management within the precincts that they have responsibility for. Leader are the owners of South Point Tuggeranong and they also undertake a range of activities and place management within areas that they have responsibility for.

If there is a desire for a greater degree of place management then we will need to extend the marketing levies that we currently apply within the CRA context. If we want to do that in every town centre, then the policy approach would need to be a resource to fund it—a co-contribution between property owners and the government. That would require the extension of such a levy across all of our town centres. Now, we have had this discussion before. I have said if there is interest then the government is very happy to look at that. But so far we have not been rushed with demand for ways to fund this.

MS CARRICK: So in the CRA there is around \$2 million in the levy and about \$20 million in appropriation for event-type activities and activation-type activities. So would you—

Mr Barr: No, I do not think that is correct. I think that is total budget, including their capital works, but there is not \$20 million of event funding within CRA.

MS CARRICK: CRA activation-type funding; it is not all for events, but it is for activation-type activities.

Mr Barr: No, capital works. That is what you are talking about.

MS CARRICK: Well, I will have a look, But there is a grant for activation, and it is about 10 times the amount of the levy.

Mr Barr: No, I do not think that is correct. But again, it is not relevant to this session. We have already had a session on the CRA.

MS CARRICK: No, this is about government strategy and policy, and so it is the government strategy.

Mr Barr: Yes, but you are talking about the financial elements of another entity.

MS CARRICK: Well, you just brought up the levy. So public-private investment, why is there such a difference in the publicly funded infrastructure in the north, but you are relying on Geocon, the Hellenic Club and Scentre Group to provide community infrastructure in Woden, including the community centre for Woden Community Service, which delivers really important services to vulnerable people?

Mr Barr: Again, we have had this question before, so I will repeat the answer—in the city as well there are examples of public-private partnerships in relation to the development of community facilities. And the Griffin Centre, which was built by the Queensland Investment Corporation as part of an agreed expansion of the Canberra Centre, is an example. There is also a skate park. There are other facilities that were built.

So this model of a developer as part of a development expansion and renewal of a precinct providing back to the community, community facilities, is one that is already proven and established and has been in operation in the CBD for more than 20 years. So it is not new, and so it is entirely plausible and reasonable to expect that in future development in other town centres, including in Woden, that the private sector can play a role.

You asked me this question just a few days ago: would the government have a leading role in determining what those facilities are? Absolutely. That is important. And a constructive piece of input rather than just arguing with me all the time might be to put forward some suggestions around the community facilities that we would like to see in Woden. That might take this beyond just this same question every hearing. I am very happy to receive ideas, and most of my other colleagues in the Assembly are submitting ideas around what they think would be a good outcome as part of any redevelopment in the town centre. I know you have ideas. I have seen you express them, so why don't we work—

MS CARRICK: But they have never gone anywhere. I have done it before and nothing happens.

Mr Barr: Well, we have got a pathway now to make this happen.

MS CARRICK: Nothing happens. It has been 20 years.

Mr Barr: Well, why don't you engage constructively then?

MS CARRICK: I am trying to, but nothing happens.

Mr Barr: This is not constructive, Ms Carrick. Put forward some ideas. I understand that you are working with a number of different areas of government, a number of different ministerial offices, on suggestions. We will take those forward as part of a process with the Scentre Group in relation to any development that they pursue in Woden.

But if the outcome of all of this is that it is too hard for them to undertake any development then, yes, not much is going to change. We know that. We want to encourage investment in the Woden Town Centre. We have already put hundreds of millions of dollars in ourselves, and we look forward to the private sector contributing as well.

MS CARRICK: I got the motion up on the cross-directorate Woden working group. I have asked everybody if they are in it or not—a lot of people do not even know if they are in it or not. I have not heard one thing from it—not one thing. Like, the communication is not there.

Mr Barr: Well, I can advise you—because I understand you put a question on notice and I have seen the answer to that—that the working group is chaired by the Southern Gateway taskforce chair, it is supported by the planning and urban policy unit within the City and Environment Directorate. Members of the working group include staff from the City and Environment Directorate, the Education Directorate, CIT, Infrastructure Canberra, the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, the Health and Community Services Directorate, and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. So that is about as holistic a government response as there can be.

All of the relevant agencies are contributing to this work. There is a reporting date, as I recall from the Assembly motion. We will continue to progress this work and prioritise the ways to attract private investment into the community infrastructure that we want to see in the Woden Town Centre, and we will continue to make the public investments that we have, including in the new transport interchange, the CIT investment and other investments that the government has made in the Woden Town Centre. But it is not the only town centre in Canberra, and there are other members who represent other electorates who also demand the attention of government and need to represent their communities as well. And I have a community to represent, too.

MS CARRICK: Yours is well represented, don't worry about that.

Mr Barr: Well, thank you; I appreciate your endorsement of my work as a local member over 20 years. Thank you very much.

MR COCKS: I want to go back to the heart I think what Ms Carrick was trying to get at right at the start. There is very clear responsibility around the City Centre in terms of the CRA, but there is a criticism of the government that a lot of the planning and the vision is very piecemeal. Is there a document or something somewhere that actually provides what the vision is across a holistic perspective across all of the different town centres and how that vision actually fits together?

Mr Barr: Sure. The Territory Plan and then each of the district plans.

MR COCKS: But that does not really go to the economic vision.

Mr Barr: We have a territory economic development strategy. That is territory wide; there is not a separate economic development strategy for every suburb in Canberra. There cannot be; our economy is too small. But we have an overarching economic development strategy for the territory, and then we have the Territory Plan that is detailed by block and section around what is allowed in particular locations. And then we have district strategies as well.

MR COCKS: But I think what we are looking for is something that ties the two ends of the spectrum together. We are not looking for a vision for every block and section and not just across the whole territory but how each district actually fits into that big vision. And what is that vision? Because people are struggling to see a clear direction here.

Mr Barr: Well, our economy is services driven. Our economic comparative advantages sit in knowledge-based industries. Our biggest export industry is higher education. Our next biggest export industry is tourism. We have a very strong professional, scientific and technical services sector. We continue to be a major regional hub for the care economy, particularly health care.

We will continue our focus on being a leader in sustainability, in renewable energy projects, in research and development. We want to continue to partner with national institutions that are based in this city that really make this the single largest concentration of public sector research anywhere in Australia. Our universities, through their membership of the Canberra Innovation Network, continue to support an innovation ecosystem that is encouraging the development of more startups and supporting those businesses to scale up.

We have recently commenced a new venture capital fund that provides an opportunity that addresses what is, I guess, a missing part of our city's capital base. Australia has always been a net importer of capital and net foreign investment in order to—

MR COCKS: Sorry, I know—

THE CHAIR: We will go on because we have a lot of members here today. You can always provide some more information if you want.

Mr Barr: We have a further hearing on economic development tomorrow morning, so perhaps we can continue the conversation.

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, would you mind explaining to the committee how the wellbeing data is formatted and how the information in the wellbeing data is sourced?

Mr Barr: Certainly. The wellbeing data is updated as regularly as we can from a variety of different data sources, some of which have reasonably frequent updates and are principally the responsibility of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Other data

sources we commission ourselves, particularly in partnership with the university sector. The University of Canberra, for example, has been commissioned to undertake regular wellbeing surveys. I think they are every two years from memory.

We have a dashboard that is intended to provide a two-yearly update on measures covering the wellbeing of Canberrans across the 12 domains within the wellbeing framework. I think in total across those 12 domains there are nearly 100 different indicators. They have updating cycles that differ depending on the domain and the data source. That is the high-level summary. I might ask Peter to expand on that if there is anything I had missed.

Mr Robinson: I have read and acknowledge the privileges statement. I think the Chief Minister has covered the broad areas in terms of data sources for our dashboard. The University of Canberra has conducted the Living Well in the ACT Region survey since 2019, and we have worked with them very closely since then. They have been partners in the development of our wellbeing thinking. They were involved in the initial conception of the framework and were part of the community consultation that was undertaken back at that time.

The survey has been run at various points through the period of COVID and so on. So it was not regular simply because of the circumstances in which it was evolving, in a sense. But now the University of Canberra is on a cycle of yearly updates of that survey and reporting. Indeed, they released their 2024 survey results early last month in October. So that survey leads the nation in terms of jurisdictional subjective wellbeing data, which covers from the ACT territory level right down to district level. It is a very, very comprehensive set of information.

MS TOUGH: How is that data and the framework then used to guide government priorities?

Mr Barr: We certainly look at areas of priority that align with both local government priorities and those that are national priorities outlined in either national cabinet decisions or decisions at ministerial council level for particular portfolios. We have a process within the annual budget and budget review—I guess, biannually in that instance—when the ERC considers new expenditure priorities to seek from directorates business cases, often collaborative business cases, that seek to make a difference on the areas of wellbeing that are sought to be prioritised.

That obviously is ultimately a political decision and one that is impacted by the level of available resources. But it would be fair to say that since the wellbeing indicators have been in place, directorates have changed their approach to collaboration with each other and sought to prioritise particular new expenditure proposals or new policy proposals with a view to improving wellbeing.

Some proposals will shift the dial on multiple wellbeing indicators; others might be more narrowly focused on just one domain, for example. But I think the important thing is that in preparing new policy proposals directorates are focused on that wellbeing data and on the capacity of a proposal to improve wellbeing. It does not mean that every single great idea can be funded. We all know the realities in which we operate—both fiscal and human resource constraints are there and will always be there. But I think the

wellbeing data has been a really important addition to the decision-making process at an ERC and cabinet level.

MR BRADDOCK: The ACTPS 2025 taskforce report highlighted ACT public servants' desire for more transparent and consistent communication from executives alongside holding people to account for deliverables and more streamlined processes and coordination between the directorates. Chief Minister, can you tell us what you have done personally to ensure the senior executive service are held to account to deliver against these staff expectations?

Mr Barr: Can I just confirm, do you mean the State of the Service Report?

MR BRADDOCK: It is the 2025 taskforce report I am referring to.

Mr Barr: You may have noticed some significant changes to the machinery of government in this term and some changes to the leadership of directorates and within the senior executive service across a number of priority areas for the government. There were retirements and people whose contracts had expired that provided an opportunity for change within the senior executive service and across multiple agencies. We now have new leadership roles in many instances and new ministers as well in probably nearly half the directorates within the ACT government, so there was considerable change in that regard

The priorities that the government are pursuing in this term are very clear to the senior executive service. The processes of cabinet have changed. So, too, have the cabinet subcommittees that are focused on particular priorities in this term. So I would say there has been considerable change.

Obviously my legal responsibilities in relation to the service have certain structures and limitations on them, but to the extent that my role as Chief Minister is outlined in legislation, the decisions that I can take in relation to the machinery of government I have taken them in this term.

MR BRADDOCK: I entirely agree there has been a lot of change. How has that contributed to holding people to account for deliverables?

Mr Barr: In some instances it would be clear that that there has been movement in areas where certain projects did not achieve either the government or the community's expectations.

MR BRADDOCK: What exactly has happened to speed up processes?

Mr Barr: Certainly cabinet and its subcommittee structure is different. I will be frank; it is certainly easier to operate a government with one political party than two. I will be honest about that that it does make life a little easier. I do not think anyone is going to disagree. Those who are inside the government know at times things took longer as a result of the need to extensively work through certain issues. Now there is a difference in terms of executive government and it is much more streamlined. The parliamentary process of course is now elongated.

MR BRADDOCK: Well, that's all right; you have all those efficiencies you gained by having one party of government to serve the parliament.

Mr Barr: Certainly in terms of many people's work-life balance, there is now much more capacity to focus on matters in the Assembly. There is much more capacity to focus on constituency matters. I do not mean to be facetious, but you have asked me a fairly pointed question around efficiencies within the executive and I am pointing to one. It is not to say that a two-party government is terrible all the time—it is not. There were many positive outcomes from that period. But if you want to look at efficiency, I can say that cabinet meetings are more frequent but shorter in duration and we are able to move through the executive agenda more quickly within the executive government.

The parliament, however, is a considerably slower process. That is clear, and that is as it is. We work, obviously, as constructively as we can with everyone, and the more matters that are unanimously resolved in the Assembly the happier I am, Mr Braddock.

MR RATTENBURY: I want to ask some questions that fall within the CRA. Particularly I want to ask about some issues that have been raised by the Braddon Collective. They have been advocating for a couple of issues. One is the provision of toilet facilities in Haig Park. Given the significant number of events and activations there they have identified a capacity issue and I want to know the government's response to that.

Mr Barr: Sure. I think the actual provision of the toilets and the maintenance of them would sit with City and Environment, but we are certainly sympathetic to that issue. I understand that there is considerable extra use of Haig Park. I consider that to be a fantastic outcome because it was once considered one of the least safe places in Canberra.

MR RATTENBURY: This is a good problem we now have.

Mr Barr: Indeed. So we will endeavour to address that issue in a subsequent budget round. But I accept it is a problem and we will work on it.

MR RATTENBURY: Has there been any analysis of what it would cost to provide additional toilet capacity in Haig Park?

Mr Barr: Depending on the plumbing. Plumbing is expensive. If you can tap into existing plumbing lines it is less expensive, but if you need to dig trenches and put in new plumbing, having had some done at home recently, it is expensive, yes.

MR RATTENBURY: The request is for an upgrade of the existing site, so that should deal with the plumbing to a large extent.

Mr Barr: Yes, hopefully. Although, I think anywhere in the inner north where there are lots of trees, the intrusion of tree roots into your plumbing is something you could expect.

MR RATTENBURY: Has there been a costing analysis by the CRA of what it would take to upgrade the facilities?

Mr Gillman: I have read and understood the privileges statement. No, we have not undertaken any costing. That would be the role of the CED as the asset owner maintainer.

Mr Barr: But we may be able to get an indicative cost of this is how much a toilet expansion has cost in other settings and provide that. But my guess is you are talking hundreds of thousands if not about a million dollars, depending on the extent of work.

MR RATTENBURY: The other issue they have raised is the Lowanna Street playground. They have identified a significant number of families moving into the area now. Is this also a CED issue or is this a CRA issue?

Mr Barr: CED.

Mr Gillman: Correct, they are the asset owner maintainers of all the public realm assets.

MR RATTENBURY: Thank you. I will direct my questions their way.

Mr Barr: Again, I understand the issue and we will certainly have it on their agenda.

MR RATTENBURY: Kingston Arts Precinct has come up and we are told it sits within your remit, Chief Minister?

Mr Barr: Yes.

MR RATTENBURY: Housing is going to be developed as part of the precinct, will there be any affordable or public housing targets as part of that project?

Mr Barr: That would be my expectation. We have a subdivision DA that the SLA are progressing. That includes a housing and structured car parking component. That is progressing ahead of other work, because an obvious question that people want the answer to is if the current surface car park is developed where will the alternate parking be. So that site can be subdivided and there will be both a housing and car parking development there.

Across the broader precinct, I think it would be appropriate for there to be an element of non-market housing. The exact composition of that will be subject to some further consideration, but I imagine there would be a degree of interest particularly in build to rent, key worker and below-market-rent housing.

MR RATTENBURY: How will that decision be taken? What considerations or criteria are taken into account to work out both the nature and the quantity of that non-market housing, as you call it?

Mr Barr: I would expect that a starting point would be the broad territory objective around a mix of housing in each precinct. We have set targets in the order of 15 per cent for the broad category of non-market housing. The exact number of dwellings and the number of non-market rented dwellings will need to be determined through a land release and obviously expression of interest or public auction process. But we would

certainly seek to set a requirement across that broader precinct.

In my mind that also extends to the precinct development that is being jointly funded between the ACT and the commonwealth under the urban precincts program, so that includes what would be described as the broader railway precinct. So around 5,000 dwellings are proposed there. The Kingston Arts Precinct housing component is much, much smaller than that. We are not trying to fit 5,000 dwellings into that site.

In looking at the mix of housing across that entire Kingston Foreshore railway precinct housing community we will look to have a mixture of public, community and build to rent and key worker housing options, and they would have a variety of different financing sources. I think superannuation funds would be interested in the key worker component. We have the HAFF as a funding source for community housing. Then we would need to look to our own budget or any future commonwealth injections into the public housing portfolio to be able to deliver new or upgraded public housing in that precinct.

MR RATTENBURY: We had a discussion with artsACT yesterday about some of these issues and they talked about identifying accommodation for artists and the like. Given the SLA is the lead on the project, I am interested to understand how the consultation will be put together between the SLA and artsACT?

Mr Barr: So artsACT are the client and the SLA is responsible for the land release. In the subdivision of the early release site, which is the car park and the housing, the SLA will take that to market. Infrastructure Canberra will be the delivery agency, as is commonplace for the arts and other facilities beyond that first SLA land release. So artsACT have considerable input as effectively the client agency as they are, I guess, the equivalent of the CFC being the client agency for the theatre project and other examples.

MR RATTENBURY: One last question: you mentioned the railway precinct. In my time I reckon we have had 20 years of announcements of East Lake being ready to go. Do you have an actual timeline on when we might see development in the railway precinct/East Lake?

Mr Barr: The work that is being funded jointly by the commonwealth and the territory governments has a completion date of 18 to 24 months from now I think. There may be some land release that can occur before that. There is a complicating factor relating to an Evoenergy substation that you would recall, and some high-voltage power lines. We also need obviously to be sensitive to the environmental needs associated with the Jerrabomberra wetlands, but there are blocks of land that could be released earlier.

There is also a major redevelopment proposal I understand that the National Capital Authority are considering in relation to Hume Circle. A number of private landholders are proposing to effectively complete that part of the Griffin legacy. As it relates to an aerial shot of the Hume Circle you see where it should go and where it could go. That process obviously sits under the National Capital Plan in the NCA's remit, but we are broadly supportive given its proximity to existing infrastructure to what would be a new Canberra railway station and really an exciting new precinct for the territory.

MR PARTON: In 2021 the ACT government made the announcement that ACT public servants who were working from home because of the pandemic would soon be able to operate from new flexi hubs to be developed an existing office space in Tuggeranong and Belconnen as part of the government's flexible work program. Now, back then, the budget papers revealed the government would spend \$2.5 million over four years to refurbish the town centre offices to support new ways of working. Chief Minister, I understand that this costly innovation has been a complete failure. And I understand that the flexi hubs are, indeed, still available for public servants to use, but they are about as busy as a One Nation branch meeting in Kurrajong.

Mr Barr: I understand that One Nation is more active in Brindabella than it is in Kurrajong, that is probably fair.

MR PARTON: But are you able to detail the success or the abject failure of this?

Mr Barr: I think it is important that the ACT government provide flexible working spaces in our town centres. The level of uptake will, of course, vary depending on business needs and circumstances for individual public servants. But I think the approach of having distributed employment opportunities and work locations has been important. There have been plenty of arguments in—

MR PARTON: Sorry, how did you end that sentence?

Mr Barr: There have been plenty of discussions in this place this century over the need to have ACT employment hubs more than just in the CBD. So we seek to have presence and flexible working arrangements in locations across the territory. I do not think that is an unreasonable proposition.

MR PARTON: Is anyone going? Is anyone using it?

Mr Barr: We have offices in Gungahlin. We have offices in Dickson. We have offices in the city, in Woden, Tuggeranong, and Belconnen.

Mr Wright: We have Greenway as well. So Greenway, Woden, Civic, Dickson, Belconnen, Gungahlin.

MR PARTON: But what I am trying to get to is sometimes we say that it seemed like a good idea at the time, but believing that workers would choose to go to a hub rather than continuing to work from home, I don't know. I am just trying to get a handle on how successful or otherwise the hubs have been.

Mr Barr: The capacity varies. There are 62 workstations in Gungahlin, 134 in Belconnen, 69 in Dickson, 10 just across the way and 60 in the Nara Centre on the other side of London Circuit. There are 45 places at Woden and 36 in the Tuggeranong facility.

MR PARTON: But is anyone using them?

Mr Barr: The capacity is a little over 400 across all of those areas. And yes, they are available for use and they are used. But there was never going to be 3,000 people working out of the Tuggeranong one; there is room for 36.

MR PARTON: The feedback I got was they were pretty empty and that in terms of money well spent this was not it.

Mr Barr: Most of them are within existing ACT government facilities.

MR RATTENBURY: Is there any measurement of their usage?

Mr Wright: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Anecdotally we have lots of people who tell me that they use the flexi hubs because it allows them to work in a manner which supports pick up, drop off, all those types of things. For example, we might have a person whose day-to-day office space is at 220 London Circuit, but on a day where they need to pick up a child or something like that they work from the Belconnen hub.

MR RATTENBURY: I understand the usage of them. My question was, is there any measurement of the usage?

Mr Wright: I understand that there is. I understand that ICBR actively is reviewing usage. I do not have that data in front of me.

MR PARTON: Would it be possible for that data to be provided on notice?

Mr Barr: Yes, we could seek to provide that data. But let me say from the outset that it would not be my intention to be closing ACT government offices in Tuggeranong, Mr Parton. I am sure you are not advocating that we do that.

MR PARTON: What I am getting to is if nobody is using them—

Mr Barr: I do not think that is the case.

MS CARRICK: Do people know about them? Do they advertise that they are there?

MR RATTENBURY: What is the metric of success for their installation?

Mr Barr: If I can put it this way: we are not going to close the building where we have thousands of staff working on it where there are 10 desks within it that are—

MR PARTON: Flexis.

Mr Barr: Yes. We are not going to close that.

MR RATTENBURY: No-one is suggesting that.

Mr Barr: The gist of the question is, are we paying to lease space in someone else's building that no-one else is using.

MR PARTON: And that is not the case.

THE CHAIR: And Ms Carrick wanted to know if you are promoting the use of these

spaces and how do you do that?

Mr Wright: Yes, we do. We regularly promote the use of the flexi hubs as a way where people can work from home. It is also a really good way to manage a situation where if a particular building cannot be used at a particular time people can work from a flexi hub. They have been widely used in regard to that. We also have a flexi hub in 220 London Circuit, which is child friendly. So if people have a day where they need to bring children to work then there is a space that is available and fit for purpose for that.

Mr Barr: What I will absolutely rule out, though, is any use of the space for One Nation branch meetings.

MR COCKS: Just trying to come back to the question that has been asked a few times now: is there a metric of success, and is there any plan to evaluate the performance of these flexi hubs?

Mr Barr: So we will have data on the number of bookings as well as casual use. Some of the spaces, as Mr Wright has just indicated, have child-friendly facilities, so we are not going to close them because circumstances like the last week would indicate that there would be times when public servants may need to bring children with them.

MR COCKS: Perhaps you can provide on notice how many were used in the last week?

Mr Barr: Probably that data will take a little while to come through, but we will see what we can do to assist there.

Mr Wright: I can say that the Winyu and the Dickson one are busy flexi space centres and get lots of usage, but we will come back with the data.

Ms Leigh: If I could add a broader point in relation to this, when you are looking at how you measure success, for me the most important thing we are doing is increasing the pool of people that we draw our ACT public service from so that we are not arbitrarily limiting who we employ simply because they may have childcare responsibilities that make it very difficult for them to juggle that responsibility or, indeed, other responsibilities with a full-time work career or even a part-time one.

What we have seen is staff saying, “Thank you. Now I can work full time when before it was part-time or even step up.” We want every single person who would contribute well to our ACT Public Service to compete for those jobs so that we get the best people, not just those who have not had to arbitrarily self-limit the opportunity to participate. So when you are measuring the success, that is probably for me the most important issue. That is the point of having all of these flexible opportunities.

MR COCKS: The question is, how are you measuring whether that ambition matches with the reality?

Ms Leigh: Yes, I just wanted to make clear that measuring has to take into account—

MR COCKS: Is there a measurement?

Ms Leigh: What I am saying is when you are asking that question it is not just bums on seats on a particular day; you need to look at the contribution to the strength overall of our public service. That said, very happy to go to the—

MR COCKS: How are you measuring that?

Ms Leigh: Very happy to go to that—

THE CHAIR: We have that understood here and they will—

Mr Barr: An obvious point is the diversity of our workforce and the fact that two-thirds of ACT government employees are women. Many of the people we employ have parental responsibilities and need that flexible working opportunity. So that would be a baseline. I am not sure we will be able to delve down to the personal details of who has sat in each of those seats on any given day, but we will do our best to provide the committee with information around their usage. But again, I think the fundamental point is it is not the government's intention to be closing our offices in Tuggeranong. And if that is your position, by all means go out and advocate for it.

MR COCKS: That is not even in question.

THE CHAIR: We look forward to what information does come through.

Mr Barr: Certainly.

THE CHAIR: And we will move on.

MR COCKS: The machinery of government changes were announced in December last year, and in announcing that the Chief Minister made some comments about the public service. He said the ACT public service's limited ability to develop and implement policies has been frustrating government decision-making. He said the government wants good advice in a timely way, then once decisions are made, it want them implemented effectively, and that is not always happening. That seemed to be the basis for these machinery of government changes. My concern is that those comments can have an impact on public servant morale. What have you done to make sure public servants actually have the backing of the government and are not being unduly criticised for things that at times are outside of their control?

Ms Leigh: I think in implementing the outcomes of that machinery of government review and in establishing the new directorates there has been an opportunity to align the structure of the public service with the government's priorities and to set that agenda for public servants, so public servants have clarity as to what their priorities are and that their workplace is organised to meet those priorities. There has been work at all levels through the public service on how we put that focus on priorities into effect. That work is still ongoing because we are still bedding down some of the arrangements within those directorates. That is being handled at the directorate level now.

It has been a real opportunity to reset and confirm the focus for the public service. I think that helps public servants to feel good about their work. They know what their objectives are, they know how they are organised to focus on those objectives and they

are also being asked to take responsibility themselves to get on and deliver those. That is the thing that always helps morale, when people feel they actually have within their control to organise how they are structured to work with their colleagues to actually deliver clear outcomes.

MR COCKS: Have you taken any action to address those comments and the implications within them?

Ms Leigh: As I was saying, the actual restructuring goes a long way to do that because it organises the public service consistently with the government's objectives. So that automatically clarifies to people what those areas of focus should be and where the resources should be allocated to meet those expectations. That is probably the most important thing.

I think after that there are a number of things that I am keen to put into place that will assist across the service. I am keen that we have more guidance at whole-of-service level, so that people do not have to reinvent the wheel in each area but then more decision-making in the local work areas, where the people on the ground are in the best place to actually make those decisions.

MR COCKS: My concern is less about the structural issues and more about the inherent lack of faith in the public service that seems to come through in that sort of comment. Have you had any concerns raised with you or through the directorates about whether public servants feel that the government actually has faith in them?

Ms Leigh: I think as the senior group in the service we constantly talk about how we can support our staff to improve performance. But I have not had somebody come to me specifically with a complaint of that nature, no.

Mr Barr: I think it is important to set some context. There have been a handful of Auditor-General reports and Assembly committee reports and findings, particularly in the context of digital, that have indicated that there have been problems. That is partly a reflection of capacity being split across multiple agencies. So one of the machinery of government changes was the creation of a centralised digital agency, Digital Canberra, with the intent of replicating the success of Infrastructure Canberra in the gradual build-up of capacity across the public service to undertake complex digital transformation tasks.

There have been a number of findings from the Auditor-General and from Assembly committees that I think necessitated a machinery of government change. I have not heard many people contest that we did not need to do something to alter the structure of government in order to be able to undertake that work.

Those are the sorts of things I was referring to. In other instances directorates have been too small to have the policy capacity, just the sheer number of people that are necessary to work on complex reforms. An example that is contemporary at the moment and regrettably still ongoing, is the engagement across the federation on the national health reform agreement, the NDIS changes, and the establishment of foundational supports. It was very clear to me that unless I made a structural change within the ACT Public Service to consolidate policy capacity we were going to struggle in implementing any

agreement out of national cabinet in relation to those matters.

Of course, the history in this area is that more than a decade ago, the states and territories handed over essentially all responsibility as part of the establishment of the NDIS. We do not have that capability anymore because we cashed it out to the commonwealth. Knowing this was coming and having had the lived experience that I was referring to in those comments of things not being able to be progressed at the pace that we needed or at the level of sophistication we needed, it was not a comment on individual public servants; it was a comment on the structural issue within the shaping of the service.

So off the back of an extensive consultation and having someone from outside the service come in and talk to everyone and provide a series of recommendations, I made those machinery of government changes with a view to strengthening capacity to address not only recommendations from the Auditor-General and from Assembly committee work but also to strengthen capacity in areas that we could see we were going to need to strengthen capacity. And that is what we did. I think the benefit of that is the opportunity in a number of the new directorates for staff to work effectively together on national priorities and, in the case of City and Environment, on housing priorities.

MR COCKS: I have certainly heard the objective that you are talking about there. At the same time there is inherent criticism that lies in this. And this is the heart of the matter I am trying to get to. A lot of the Auditor-General reports that you are talking to and a lot of the failures that we have seen across government over a number of years now, the criticism is that your government refuses to take responsibility at ministerial level and seems to like to pass the buck on to public servants and throw them under the bus.

Mr Barr: This is where I substantially disagree on that point.

MR COCKS: We have just seen a recent example with the MyWay+ problems where it took an extended length of time before a minister would apologise. Indeed, you had to apologise before the minister did so. It seems to be endemic in the approach to the public service that they are the first ones under the bus. That is their big concern.

Mr Barr: I do not accept that characterisation, and nor do I accept that ministers are running projects. They are not. That is not the role of a minister.

MR COCKS: They sign off on them, though.

Mr Barr: Based on advice from the public service. The ministers are not involved in procurement. The ministers are not involved in the day-to-day running of technology projects.

MR COCKS: Cabinet reviews these things though, right?

Mr Barr: Cabinet reviews them, but based again on papers and information that are prepared by the public service. So the issue at heart was around the capacity that the service needed in order to undertake these projects better. You would be asking me a different set of questions if I had just ignored all of the Auditor-General reports and the findings of Assembly committees. It is not about ministers; it is about capacity. And we

have made the changes to ensure that the public service has better capacity to address what are complex issues.

MS CARRICK: Is it the minister's job to ask questions of the public servants to seek assurance and be satisfied that the implementation is on track?

Mr Barr: Yes.

MS CARRICK: So it is about looking at the contract, the milestones, the risk register and the minister asking lots of questions about it?

Mr Barr: Yes, that is true. The minister can ask the questions, but the minister does not write the answers.

MS CARRICK: But if the minister is uncomfortable about the answers and not sure, then it is a continual process of asking more and more questions until you are absolutely satisfied.

Mr Barr: Indeed, yes.

MS CARRICK: And in MyWay+ how could one be absolutely satisfied when you look at the outcome we got?

Mr Barr: There have been a series of findings and recommendations in relation to that. I have said it was not ready to launch and would have benefited from more time. In 15 or 20 years when there is next the need to update a ticketing system for public transport, the lessons from this experience certainly need to be learnt. It is more likely than not that it will be within the public service that that experience will be drawn upon because I would imagine that in 20 years the politicians who are here now will probably not be the same.

MS CARRICK: I do not think we have wait 20 years. There are other programs going on now, and ministers should be asking the questions—

Mr Barr: Indeed. And one of the reasons we established the new agency is to improve the capacity within the public service to be able to undertake those projects and to be able to provide answers to questions that not just ministers but stakeholders, the Assembly and other interested parties will ask as projects develop. But if the capacity is not there you cannot single out any one individual and say questions should have been asked earlier about who was taking responsibility for certain things and were there any accountability measures for the senior executive service. Yes, there are. And ultimately if a senior executive member is not able to perform their tasks then their contract is not renewed.

THE CHAIR: On that note, on behalf of the committee and our visiting members we thank you, Mr Barr, for attending, and also officials. Have a good morning, and this meeting is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 10.32 am.