



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2023-24](#))

Members:

**MR T EMERSON (Chair)
MS C BARRY (Deputy Chair)
MR J HANSON
MISS L NUTTALL
MS C TOUGH**

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 18 FEBRUARY 2025

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**Secretary to the committee:
Ms K Langham (Ph: 620 75498)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

APPEARANCES

Community Services Directorate	218, 238
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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 10.46 am.

Appearances:

Pettersson, Mr Michael, Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Brendas, Ms Tina, Acting Executive Group Manager (Deputy); Children, Youth and Families Division

Saballa, Ms Melanie, Executive Branch Manager; Next Steps; Children, Youth and Families Division

Evans, Ms Jacinta, Executive Group Manager, Strategic Policy

Akhter, Ms Sanzida, Executive Branch Manager; Women, Youth and Multicultural Affairs; Inclusion Division

Barker, Dr Justin, Chair of the Therapeutic Support Panel

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

THE CHAIR: Good morning, and welcome to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2023-24. The committee will this morning hear from the Minister for Children, Youth and Families.

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

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

We welcome Mr Michael Pettersson MLA, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. When you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and agree to comply with it. As we are not inviting opening statements, we will proceed to questions.

I have a question on youth justice in relation to the custodial inspector's recent report. Are children in detention now being permitted to hug their parents when they come and visit them?

Mr Pettersson: Yes, but I will hand over to officials to speak through that process.

Ms Rule: I acknowledge the privilege statement. As the minister said, the answer to that question is yes. In a custodial environment like Bimberi, there is always a balance between the security requirements and the needs of the young people. It is a constant matter that the staff at Bimberi are very diligent of and we have worked through those matters. It is correct to say that there is now physical contact allowed between the young people and the visitors at Bimberi.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic. Was that in response to the Healthy Centre Review?

Ms Rule: It has been under consideration for quite some time. Yes, it was brought to the fore in the review, but it is something that we were always looking at in the security settings in Bimberi. That is one factor in the decision-making around changing those settings and how things are working in Bimberi.

THE CHAIR: That is very good to hear. We heard from the official visitor that Bimberi has capacity for 40 children but it is only staffed to 20, and so when capacity reaches beyond 20 they are understaffed. Can you provide an indication of how many days in the last calendar year Bimberi was understaffed?

Ms Rule: We can come to the staffing numbers. Bimberi works in units, and you open a unit and another unit, depending on capacity. It is an ongoing discussion with government about how much funding is required based on average numbers of children in there. Fortunately, the number of young people in Bimberi is consistently fewer than 20. But, from time to time, that capacity does surge, and we do have mechanisms in place for managing that. I might ask Ms Brendas to talk a little bit about that.

Ms Brendas: Good morning. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. In relation to your question around where staffing has been lower, from January to February, we had one lunch lockdown due to operational requirements—so where we have been short of staff. That was a lunch lockdown, which was for an hour. That is from January to February. We offer overtime and have a casual pool from where we call on staff when we know our staffing numbers are low, so it does not impact the day-to-day operations of the centre whereby the young people have to be kept in their rooms for longer periods of time than necessary.

THE CHAIR: Where does this figure of 20 children come from? Is that for the required number of staff who are there for that capacity and then there are some surge initiatives, or whatever you do when you go over that number? Where does that come from?

Ms Brendas: We are budgeted for 20. In the last budget process, we received additional funds for an additional six beds, making it a 26-bed capacity. That was in that process and, therefore, we have funding until June.

Ms Rule: Just to give you a bit of context, Mr Emerson, the way that Bimberi is set out, there are a number of separate units, buildings. Each of those buildings has a set number of beds, and there is a minimum staffing requirement that you need, to have young people in those beds. The number that we are funded for is to have enough units open for 20 beds. As Ms Brendas said, that is going up a little bit to allow us to open another

unit. So, whether we need 21 beds or 26 beds, the funding requirement is the same, because you have to staff each of those individual buildings, if you like. It is a kind of formula about the minimum staffing requirements you need for each of those structural units—they are separate buildings at Bimberi—and the staffing that you require.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to provide the number of days in 2023 to 2024, or the 2024 calendar—or nights—in which there were more than 20 children?

Ms Rule: We can take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: Just quickly on youth justice, what work is being done across our system to prepare for raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility in July?

Ms Rule: I will make some opening comments while Ms Evans comes to the table. I note that we have already been through one phase of raising the criminal age. It is a two-phase project of starting at 12 and then going to 14. We have already gone up to 12. That has allowed us to get a lot of the infrastructure in place around how we will respond to those young people who may have otherwise been subject to the youth justice system. We will then be able to build on when the age goes up to 14 in July of this year.

Ms Evans: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Thanks for the question. Yes, there has been a significant amount of work. The reason that the ACT government staged the approach to raising the minimum age was to allow us to ascertain, when we raised the age to 12, what kinds of things we needed to have in place to then raise the age to 14 from July this year. Of course, the most critical part of that work is the children who are under 14—those 10- to 14-year-olds—who are currently in the youth justice system. We have had to look at how we support them coming out of whatever orders or whatever situation they find themselves in.

That work is being done on a very bespoke, individual basis with each young person, to determine what their support needs would look like. We are fortunate in the sense that we actually do not have huge numbers of children who are 10, 11, 12 or 13 in our youth justice system. So it has been able to be that more individualised and bespoke response to them. There are some legal implications to the change. It does mean that the records of those young people are expunged around any previous criminal charges that they have had. So there is some work around that legal element of the change.

But, largely, as I say, we are very well placed with our colleagues in the youth justice and Bimberi support area to consider who those young people are. I am sure there may be other questions that will come around what we are doing in a therapeutic sense to support children more broadly under the age of 14.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to provide on notice how many children are in that?

Ms Brendas: Mr Emerson, I have that figure. It is a really small proportion; so I would be reluctant to provide the actual figure, being it is much less than five.

THE CHAIR: Much less than five.

Ms Brendas: It would be identifying the young people.

THE CHAIR: I understand.

Ms Rule: We tend not to provide data less than five because it then becomes possible to identify young people, potentially. So less than five.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS BARRY: You mentioned the therapeutic service. Can you identify what programs are currently in place?

Ms Evans: I can. Minister, Dr Barker could join us to talk about the therapeutic programs, if that is all right with you.

Mr Pettersson: That would be a great addition.

Ms Rule: Dr Barker is the chair of our Therapeutic Support Panel. One of the initiatives under MACR, minimum age of criminal responsibility, has been the establishment of a Therapeutic Support Panel, which is chaired by Dr Barker, and includes people with relevant expertise who do that individual, bespoke case planning for the young people coming across their radar. I think it is such an enhancement to the system. Rather than having one-size-fits-all programs where we refer somebody to a thing, we are now able to plan based on the individual need of the young people and based on who they are and what their issues might be. We have some money available so that we buy individualised services, rather than having to have people fit into already funded programs. Dr Barker can elaborate.

Dr Barker: I am the chair of the Therapeutic Support Panel. I have read and will comply with the privilege statement. The Therapeutic Support Panel was set up in response to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. There is a multidisciplinary panel of people who have been appointed to that and have a range of experience and expertise to help advise the support that needs to happen for the kids and to create therapy plans for the kids to get referred to us. There is also a case management team, where I have a team leader and three case managers who receive the referrals and provide support—kind of coordinate, supervise and provide support—to those children and young people that are referred to us.

As Catherine pointed out, one of the strengths of this approach is that it is a bespoke approach for each young person to match their individual needs. The logic of the panel—in line with the evidence and research that we had prior to this and that we are continuing to gather while we do the Therapeutic Support Panel—was to look at attending to the unmet needs of these children and meeting their therapeutic needs, to look at what is causing their harmful behaviour and to make sure we are addressing those needs to reduce the likelihood of more harmful behaviour.

That often takes a very holistic approach. While we are a new service, a new program, what we try to do is to optimise and use existing services in the community sector as effectively as possible. That means that we can reach out and use mental health services, reach out to education, reach out to anyone else we need to—for example, disability

support—to make sure we can match the services and we can coordinate that support for these children and young people. That allows us to mobilise those existing resources operationally on a case-by-case basis.

The other role of the panel is to make sure we monitor the system gaps and needs. Over a long period of time, when we start to see patterns of behaviours where there may be gaps, the panel and I can then approach ministers or the DG or anyone else who needs to know about what those gaps are and advise them of what services might need to be put in place to meet those needs. At the moment, the sample size is very small, and it is really hard for us to infer what those gaps might be, moving into the future.

MS BARRY: The question I asked was: what are you practically doing? I understand the structure and the theoretical parts of it. The sample size is four—right?

Ms Rule: Less than five.

MS BARRY: Less than five. I am guessing that these referrals have come from the police or other services. Explain to me what would happen when you get a referral.

Dr Barker: We have actually had just over 50 referrals to the panel—because we do not just work with kids under the minimum age who are involved in the justice system; we also do early intervention work for kids who are at risk of harmful behaviour. We are currently working with 25 young people, and less than five—for reasons of confidentiality for those—are involved in the justice system.

Kids get referred to us from the community, from a referring entity. Most of the referrals come from ACT Policing, Education and CYF. We then do an initial assessment. We get information from the family, and any other source that we need to, to look at what their unmet needs are and whether they are being met in the community with other services or whether they can have their needs met in the community without them coming to us. After we have had that initial assessment, all of these assessments go past the multidisciplinary panel to make sure that we are making the right decisions about who to work with and who not to work with and the type of work that we are doing.

Once a client comes into a program, we then create a therapy plan for them. The first stage of work is actually what we call the engagement phase. We have to make sure we can engage the young person and their family and develop trust and rapport, which are the foundations of any therapeutic work for these kids. That also allows us to gain more information and do a series of assessments for that child and their family and the other people in their ecosystem of support. Then we can match them to what their needs are. Often, more needs emerge as time goes on and we develop that trust and rapport to be able to identify what it is that is going on for them and to kind of more accurately match them to the supports they need in the community.

That can change. If it is a kid that is doing early intervention, we can see that they are at risk of harmful behaviour, which is fantastic. They are often a bit younger, and we can help work with them to steer them away from what previously would have been justice involvement. That can often involve a bit more of a light touch and attending to their welfare needs more than their criminogenic needs, because they often do not have as many criminogenic needs. Then, with the kids who we see who are already using

behaviours that we are concerned about, we often have to prioritise what were previously called “criminogenic needs” that we need to attend to so as to reduce the likelihood of harmful behaviour and make sure we prioritise attending to those needs. We can use a range of professionals in the community to help get the assessments for these kids to identify what those needs are and match them with those responses.

MS BARRY: What sorts of services do you work with—for example, “We work with this service, that service and that service.”

Dr Barker: There is kind of a hierarchy of needs for a lot of these children and young people. When we talk about therapy and the Therapeutic Support Panel, the idea of therapy is to heal these young people and to help address and ameliorate any kinds of harms that have happened to them. Often, the first thing that we need to do is attend to their primary needs. We need to make sure that they have stable living conditions, that they are eating, that they can sleep and that they can take part in education and have their health needs met. If we are not providing that level of stability, it is very hard to do the next level of therapeutic support. For most of them, it is engaging in prosocial activities and making sure that they are engaging with other people. But you remember how young these kids are—

MS BARRY: I am sorry; just give me a service that you are working with. That is what I have asked. Are you working with—

Ms Rule: ACT Mental Health, for example.

MS BARRY: ACT Mental Health. What other services are you working with?

Dr Barker: We work with CAMHS, we work with Health and, more broadly, we work with Education. Sometimes we have to engage private psychiatrists and paediatricians, and sometimes we have to get disability experts to create positive behaviour support plans.

Ms Evans: Ms Berry, I think you were asking what, aside from assessing the children, we would be doing to help them.

MS BARRY: That is correct. Where are you referring them to? Where are they going? Who is responsible?

Ms Evans: Dr Barker, I think, is setting the scene that these are early days and, for many of these kids, we are only just working through what is going on for them. So there is the assessment processes and that sort of thing. But, as to the sorts of programs that we might consider, for some of these kids, it is about, for example, whether we can link them with a sports team; and, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, whether there are cultural activities that they can be engaged in. We have some connections, for instance, with our JACS colleagues around an on-country program. We think about whether it would be an appropriate thing for them to spend time in positive environments where there are adults that they can trust and that they can build a relationship with that will result in the kinds of outcomes that we are looking for.

In general, as Dr Barker said, with a small number of kids, we do not have “this program

we always use”; we are exploring the different kinds of programs and activities that best suit each individual child. Most of it at the moment is going to those really core needs—their health, their mental health and managing drug and alcohol issues—rather than having a program that says, “All of these kids will go to basketball on a Thursday.” We do not have that level of programming, but we are getting there. We are moving towards a space where we think about what the positive, social aspects of the program would look like and what the specifically therapeutic aspects of the program would look like. I hope that is a little bit more—

MS BARRY: That is useful.

MISS NUTTALL: This question is about body scanner technology, just going back to the Healthy Prison Review. Are strip searches still being undertaken at Bimberi?

Ms Brendas: Yes, strip searches are still one of our various modes of search. We have an ordinary search, a frisk search and, then, as the last level of search, if we suspect that this young person has contraband on them, we currently do strip searching, which is partial-clothed searching of young people.

MISS NUTTALL: I understand that one of the recommendations of the Healthy Centre Review was to expedite the procurement of body scanner technology, which would ideally remove the need for strip searches. What is the status of the procurement of that body scanner technology?

Ms Rule: We are still working through the recommendations and the government response to the recommendations, which is due to be tabled in the Assembly in June, I believe. We are just working through that. Clearly, there are cost implications around that type of equipment, as well as staffing implications around training and people being able to use that equipment. We are just working through that in terms of the government’s response to the review.

MISS NUTTALL: Do you have a timeline for when you would be able to implement that body scanner technology? I understand that it has been on the cards for a while, if the review is calling for expediting it.

Ms Rule: It is part of the discussion with government about resourcing that work. The government’s response to the review is due in June. So we do not yet have a timeline is, I think, what I am saying, because we need to work through the resourcing implications of that technology with government.

MISS NUTTALL: Is there any reason that that would not be a funding priority, given that strip searches are a pretty invasive thing and it is not great that it is happening to young people—or anyone, really? Is that a priority? I guess that is what I am asking.

Mr Pettersson: I acknowledge the privilege statement. This has been an issue of discussion for several years. From the figures I have in front of me, one out of 141 young people were strip searched upon induction at Bimberi in the first half of last financial year. Bimberi is also the only youth detention centre in the country that does not routinely strip search young people when they enter custody. I do not think we are dealing with the same issues that other jurisdictions are dealing with. I note the

recommendation. I appreciate the spirit in which it has been made. It will be considered, and we will respond to it in due course.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. In parallel, one of the things that the recommendation talked about was legislation to ban strip searches. Ideally, that technology would enable us to do that. Is there any work in train about legislation to ban strip searches here in the ACT?

Mr Pettersson: I do not believe so. I do not believe the issues as described at Bimberi, in relation to other jurisdictions, would indicate that we have a large problem here in the ACT. But I do acknowledge the existence of that issue. I appreciate that an X-ray scanner would assist in reducing that number from one to zero. We will consider the recommendation, and we will respond back through the Assembly.

MS BARRY: If it is okay, I would like to continue on the therapeutic wraparound service. What mechanisms do you have in place to ensure that those services are working? Is there a plan to evaluate before the age is raised to 14?

Dr Barker: There is a plan to evaluate. I do not think the evaluation will be able to happen before July, because I think the program may change from July onwards, when the age raises to 14, and we need to make sure we have got enough data to be able to do that evaluation. But we are collecting data as we go for all of the kids, to be able to monitor their progress to see how effectively the supports are working and how well the services are providing the support that they need to provide.

MS BARRY: Thank you. That is useful. What performance measures are you using to collect this data?

Dr Barker: One of the key things to start with, especially in the engagement phase, is how readily and accessible young people are able to engage with the services. If we match them with an evidence-based intervention, their participation in that intervention is the key outcome measure that we are going to use, to start with—the key indicator. After a period of time, their participation in an evidence-based intervention is probably going to lead to a good outcome.

But, over a period of time, we have to look at different outcome measures, and that will change, depending on what the intervention is. If it is improving self-efficacy or improving family functioning, we will have to look at what the indicators are for those kids over a period of time. But the first indicator for success is matching them with the right service and getting them to meaningfully participate with that service and support.

MS BARRY: So, currently, that is the only indicator you have. Is that right?

Dr Barker: We collect pre-data as well. We collect data from them about what their engagement is, what harms happened to the community and what are their support needs. Then, over a period of time, we can get post data to be able to match that to see how things have changed. We have to collect that data as we go along. We have to make that quite global as well. So we have to use a range of different measures to think about “What is that going to look like?”. Again, it might be to do with their exposure to interparental conflict, family functioning, self-efficacy, their participation in education

or their attitudes to education. We collect that to start with, and we continue to iteratively collect that over a period of time so we can see what that change looks like. So, yes, we have to collect data throughout the time we are engaging with these young people.

MS BARRY: Thank you. I am anticipating you are working with CSD to make sure that they are engaged in education—because, obviously, one of the strongest indicators of young people not reoffending would be effective education engagement?

Dr Barker: Yes, absolutely. Engaging young people in education, training and employment is one of the key things we want to be able to do to improve desistance and reduce recidivism. Often, for these young people, that is just helping them get access to that education, and it is the same with our engagement with Health and the other key stakeholders.

MS BARRY: Thank you. Minister, how are you aligning this approach with the approach in Bimberi, considering that the Inspector-General's report has indicated that there is a lean towards security of staff in Bimberi rather than therapeutic support for children in Bimberi? How are you aligning this? Obviously, the plan is to make sure that these young people do not come back into custody. How is this aligning with the approach in Bimberi?

Mr Pettersson: It is in alignment. I will hand to officials to speak through the processes underway at Bimberi. I think it is very clear that this government is taking the position that we want to provide a therapeutic response, whether that be in the community or in Bimberi.

Ms Rule: They are not different things. Some of these kids will no longer be of an age where they can go into Bimberi, be that 10 to 12 now or up to 14 when the age raises again. Those are children that previously may have gone into Bimberi who will not go into Bimberi at this point in time and have access to the range of supports and interventions that Dr Barker has described. That piece of work is all about keeping those young people out of Bimberi.

In terms of once people get into Bimberi, it is a security environment. It is a custodial environment, but it does not mean that we are not paying attention to the therapeutic needs of the children within Bimberi. It is always a balance. In fact, as Dr Barker has said, some of the young people who are above the age of 14 are also being considered by the Therapeutic Support Panel, and that includes some young people who go into Bimberi. The nature of the young people that go into Bimberi means that often they cycle in and out of the centre for very short periods of time. It might be a day or two; it might be a week or two, and there are some who are there for a longer term. They all have different needs, and we work with them in different ways to make sure that they are engaged with things that can help them longer term to stay out of a custodial environment, but there is always a secure environment.

MS BARRY: Could you give me an example of the sorts of programs that are currently in Bimberi that the kids are engaged in?

Ms Rule: Yes. I think in the education hearing yesterday we talked a bit about the

Muliyar School. There is a school environment within Bimberi and, for many of those young people, it is the first time that they have been regularly engaged with school for some time. That is one example. So we reconnect them with education. There are other more applied training programs that happen within Bimberi. For example, young people might get their white card so that they can work on building sites when they leave the custodial environment. They get their driver's licence. They get their health and mental health needs attended to in a way that they have not had necessarily in the community prior to coming into that custodial environment. For each of those young people, we try to look at what their needs are but also what their goals and aspirations are so that we can work with them in the time that they are in Bimberi to better equip them to stay out of a custodial environment but also to contribute to them leading a more meaningful life when they do leave.

THE CHAIR: You said you are engaged with 25 children currently. What are the referral pathways? Where are these kids coming from?

Dr Barker: Primarily, the referrals are coming from Child Youth and Families, ACT Policing and Education. The next largest referrer is communities—so carers and family members.

THE CHAIR: I have had it put to me from police who have said, “The age is going to go up further, and kids who we might previously have referred on somewhere, will just say to us, ‘I am under the age. You have no remit here.’” I am in favour of raising the age, but is there a potential gap in the referral pathway as a consequence of that?

Dr Barker: Not that we have seen. We have actually got a really good relationship with the police, who refer to us anyone who they are concerned about. We will sometimes get a referral for the same kid from Education as well. Normally, the kids with harmful behaviour are known to us by several different people in the community. So we can get a referral from different sources. At the moment, there does not appear to be any gaps in the referrals. Canberra is a small community. So it is really easy to know and, if you have got good connections to ACT Policing and Education, in particular, to get those referrals very quickly.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS BARRY: Minister, is there any work being done to ensure that children under the age are not used to commit crime because they are under the age?

Mr Pettersson: Good question. As you would be aware, we have already raised the age, and I am not aware of any instances of that occurring in the ACT. We will keep a watching brief to see if that does become an issue. But I am reasonably confident that that will not be an issue.

Ms Rule: It is also quite a technical legal question. It is the minimum age of criminal responsibility. A person under 14 can no longer be found guilty of criminal behaviour. So it actually changes that definition of what criminal behaviour is. I am not trying to kind of wordsmith you, but the whole point is that they stay out of the criminal justice system and in a therapeutic support system, because every piece of research says that is where you are going to get better lifelong outcomes than people being engaged in the

criminal justice system.

MS BARRY: Absolutely. But you have syndicates who would exploit this loophole, which is that children under 14 cannot be held criminally liable even though they do something wrong.

Mr Rule: That was certainly one of the issues that was raised in committees when we were consulting on the legislation around this. But there is no evidence we have seen as yet that that is occurring in the ACT.

MS BARRY: That is good to know.

MS TOUGH: Minister, can you provide an update on the government's progress to implement the Next Steps for Our Kids strategy, please?

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful question. I will get some officials up.

Ms Rule: We will ask Ms Saballa to come to the table. Next Steps is a 10-year strategy around ongoing reform to the child protection system, in particular, or the out-of-home care system. We are about a year in, I think, to that policy being in place, and we have implemented a whole range of things. Ms Saballa can talk to the details of some of those.

Ms Saballa: Good morning committee. I am the Executive Branch Manager for Next Steps reform and strategy implementation. I have read and I understand the privilege statement. Could I please check your question again? Were you asking specifically about governance? If you would not mind sharing it again, please.

MS TOUGH: I am interested in the progress to implement the strategy—where it is up to and where we are heading from here.

Ms Saballa: Thank you. It is a really great question. A lot has been progressed. It is an eight-year strategy. It was released in mid-2022. It is an ambitious reform agenda, and I would be very pleased to share an update with the committee. Because it is such a significant agenda, we have actually broken it down into a phased approach. The first couple of years was really the transition phase, and the milestone there was the procurement for a provider of specialist therapeutic residential care. At the moment, we are in the reform rollout phase. We are really focusing on the rollout of short- to medium-term programs of work to activate and release the longer-term system outcomes. Following that, five years on, that is going to be the consolidation phase.

I would like to speak to you about the reform rollout phase now. What we are focusing on is the new service system. Next Steps for Our Kids was really about a new service system to shift investment from high-cost tertiary interventions to earlier support and diversion, where children and young people can remain safely at home with their families. That included supporting people and parents with disability.

The other thing that we are really focusing on is collaborative governance. When you are implementing reform of this scale, it is about the work that we do within government and Children, Youth and Families Division, and it is absolutely about the work that we

do with our community sector partners. That is a big focus of what we are doing now.

I also wanted to share with you that there has been important investment to support the reform rollout under Next Steps for Our Kids. The recent 2024-25 initiatives bring the total investment to improve support for children and families at risk to more than \$194 million since 2022, including capital investments in properties for therapeutic residential care.

If we are looking at where we are up to in terms of the range of priority initiatives and the raft of actions, the majority of reform actions under Next Steps has commenced, and many priority initiatives are now in place. We have flagship initiatives that we have been focusing on, and then reform actions will continue to be implemented across the life of the strategy.

I will go to some of the key things that we have been working on over the past year. The first one would be implementing a new service system. There is some really big procurement work that we have addressed. We are wanting to shift the focus in investment to improve earlier support for families and keep children and young people safe. At the end of 2023, we undertook a large procurement process to secure services required to implement that new service system. The service system in Next Steps for Our Kids was developed in consultation with people with lived and living experience; providers in the space already; community sector partners; and advocates. We really took that on board in developing Next Steps for Our Kids. The procurement was finalised in September 2024.

What we have now and what we are establishing is what we are calling a panel. It is a children and young people and families panel. Preferred providers who were successful under that procurement process will have contracts to develop a range of services—care and protection, out of home care and support services for families. We are now at the stage where that procurement is closed and finalised—that was in September last year—and we are now transitioning to those panel arrangements. It is detailed work. We are working closely with those panel providers and the wider community sector, and, of course, there are a range of stakeholders that are really interested in this shift as well.

The other thing that I wanted to talk about with you in terms of establishing that panel is that there is a range of information sessions. We have panel providers that are new to the ACT. We have a range of providers. They are going to be providing a range of service packages. Many of those providers have a footprint in the ACT already but some are new to the ACT. We have a calendar of information briefings that we are rolling out with providers.

The other thing that I wanted to mention in terms of support for Next Steps for Our Kids is governance. Governance is one of those underpinning things. It is internal within Children Youth and Families and a whole lot of work has been done internally in terms of the structure, the way we support the reform and the work that we do. Then, externally, you may be aware that we have the Child and Family Reform Ministerial Advisory Council. They commenced operations in September 2023. They have had nine meetings. They have an important and diverse group of members on that council, including strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation and also people

with lived and living experience. Under the council there has been a small number of focus groups. That has been, I think, a really important part of the governance for Next Steps for Our Kids.

There is lots to be able to share with you. I hope that I have been able to just skip across some of the main things. But, in terms of an eight-year reform agenda, the reform actions will continue to be implemented across the life of the strategy to ensure system responsiveness to the needs of children and young people, families and carers.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any supplementaries? I am just noticing the time.

MS TOUGH: No; she has pretty much covered every supplementary I was going to ask. It is wonderful, actually; thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: I am interested in the Next Steps for Our Kids project. I am interested in whether the authors of the *Listen to me!* report, which was sort of pulled together by the Children and Young Peoples Commissioner, have been involved in this process at all and whether their lived experience has been relied on.

Ms Rule: The Next Steps policy document predates that work that you are referring to. But we certainly have been working closely with the Human Rights Commission on that work, which is incredibly powerful—done by a group of young people. We have established ongoing relationships with the young people who did that work and the Human Rights Commission, to ensure that we are continuing to embed the lived experience of the young people and that their voices are being heard in the reform of the system.

MISS NUTTALL: Awesome. I am encouraged to hear that. Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: Let's talk about the ACT Youth Assembly, if that is all right. When the Youth Assembly makes a report, what are the mechanisms that require government to respond? Is government required to respond to the Youth Assembly reports?

Ms Rule: I will just get to the table Ms Akhter, who can talk a bit about how that process works.

Ms Akhter: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The purpose of the ACT Youth Assembly is to bring together young Canberrans aged between 12 and 25 years to share ideas on how to advocate and advance youth issues. and is hosted by the ACT Youth Advisory Council. It is usually held once in two years. The last one that we delivered was on 23 June 2023. Following the Assembly where they discussed three topic areas—gender equality, social inclusion and cost of living—the Youth Advisory Council then produced a report and submitted it for government consideration. The ACT government then finalised its response to the report recommendations and it was tabled during the June 2024 sitting weeks.

The report provided 31 recommendations. The government, in its response to the report, agreed to nine of them, agreed in principle to 10 of them and noted 12 recommendations. All of these recommendations are sitting across the ACT government and align with, in most cases, what we are already doing so that we can

support and ensure that young people's voice are heard.

MISS NUTTALL: Forgive me if I did not catch it, but is the government formally obliged to respond to the ACT Youth Assembly reports? Is there any statutory obligation?

Ms Akhter: Government does respond to the recommendations of the report. As I mentioned, it was tabled in the Assembly in the June sittings of 2024. That is a formal response the government has provided where a range of recommendations were agreed to.

Ms Rule: But there is no legislative requirement; it just good practice.

MISS NUTTALL: It is good if that is convention.

Mr Pettersson: Rest assured, we will respond.

MISS NUTTALL: Fantastic. I do have the government response with me. Does the government have any sort of obligation to action the recommendations? I do note that you have sort of broken down the ones that you have agreed to, agreed in principle and noted. Is there any formal follow-up mechanism to how the government responds to that report? I appreciate that they are whole-of-government recommendations.

Mr Pettersson: That is a good question. I have not had any in the Assembly yet. There is one coming up.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes; I am excited about it.

Ms Rule: Again, there is no embedded review mechanism. But I have no doubt that the Youth Advisory Council and the Youth Assembly will be keen to call the minister to account for the government's actions.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes. That actually went to my next question. I appreciate that they only convene as an assembly every two years, but are there any methods in place to follow up with government if they are concerned that a recommendation has been agreed but then is not followed up on?

Mr Pettersson: That is a reasonable question. I would not place too much of the responsibility to ensure those recommendations are actioned with the participants of the Youth Assembly. Broadly, through the democratic processes that exist within our territory and the ways that they can engage with us as their representatives, would be a pathway available to them. But the Youth Assembly is not a binding forum. It does not have a democratic mandate, so to speak. So the weight of those recommendations needs to be considered in that context. We take them very seriously and we respond to them and recommendations should be actioned and followed up. If there is a view—through those individual, through the YAC or through their representatives—that the government is not being hasty in its implementation of those recommendations, I am happy to hear those concerns.

MISS NUTTALL: Awesome. Thank you. How many of the recommendations of the

previous Youth Assembly have been actioned? Is that something that you track within Children, Youth and Families?

Ms Rule: We would have to take that on notice. I am not sure is the answer. I do not know whether Ms Akhter can—

Ms Akhter: As the minister and the director-general have mentioned, the ACT Youth Advisory Council is the mechanism to make sure that we are working with them in support of implementing those recommendations where possible. The Youth Advisory Council will collate information ahead of the 2025 Youth Assembly and will engage with us about how they think the progress has been made. Obviously, we work with them closely and provide the support where we can. Government does not have a binding role, of course, but we try to work with them as much as we can to ensure the recommendations are implemented where possible.

MISS NUTTALL: One of the noted recommendations from the Social Inclusion Forum back in 2023 was—and I am paraphrasing—to co-design, establish and fund long-term youth consultation programs, like cluster councils, in all ACT education institutions and youth sector settings. The recommendation, I thought, was really interesting in that it sort of emphasised the involvement in decision-making processes. I think this is a common theme in sort of youth enfranchisement space. The government mentions that the Youth Advisory Council, the Youth Interact Grants and the Student Voice Working Group are sort of there but, to the best of my knowledge—and please correct me if I am wrong—none of these have a demonstrable involvement in the government decision-making process. What was the main barrier to implementing the cluster council model and involving young people in the actual decision-making process? Was it logistics, statutory or—

Ms Akhter: We would have used the Youth Advisory Council as the mechanism, as I have mentioned before. To an extent, I would argue that the Youth Advisory Council does make an impact in informing government's decisions. For example, in 2023-24, the council held 10 regular meetings and contributed to 33 consultations to provide advice to the ACT government. Obviously, a number of those consultations made a real impact in the government's decision-making. They usually touch on the youth sector and issues that affect young people in the ACT. These consultations include face-to-face meetings. They can be in the form of submissions, letters, surveys, panel assessment, training and participation in forums.

Just to give one example of where we could see that they have informed government's decisions, in February 2024 the council prepared a submission to the inquiry into loneliness and social inclusion in the ACT. Their submission included a number of recommendations. The final report of that inquiry, which included the voice of Canberra's young people, referencing YAC's submission, was submitted by the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion and published in September 2024. The submission paper and recommendations provided by the young people were referenced over 20 times in that report. I am making an assumption here, but this is a way to say that they have been making an impact in informing and influencing government decisions.

MISS NUTTALL: It is encouraging to sort of have that impact, but what I am looking

for is the formal decision-making point. It is absolutely excellent advice and I am really glad the government has continued to take it on board, but I am think about follow-up mechanisms.

THE CHAIR: Are you happy to take on notice that question about how many of those recommendations have been implemented, because we are getting mixed messages? I think you said, Minister, it is kind of on the democratic institution we have to ensure that these recommendations are implemented, but Ms Akhter said almost the opposite, that it is on the YAC to ensure—

Mr Pettersson: I said it was on all of the above. I did reference YAC. Just picking up on your line of questioning, Miss Nuttall, forgive me, but I am not particularly aware of the cluster council model. I will look into that. I have already had a range of individuals, groups and stakeholders come to me with suggestions, interesting and varied, in ways that we can improve engagement with young people and their participation in civic life.

As one with a key interest in these matters, I have a very open mind. I think we have an offering at the moment that meets certain purposes. If there are particular gaps that we are missing, I am very open to exploring what they are. But what I am conscious of is that there is often some overlapping goals with the proposals that are put to me. Whether we are trying to increase civics education, trying to increase the role in democracy of young people directly and whether we can get the model right based on what we have already got in place, I would love to continue that conversation.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MS BARRY: I want to continue on the line of questioning on the human right abuses that was referenced in the Healthy Centre Review. Minister, I am glad to hear that children are now able to hug their parents, but this has been ongoing for quite some time. Is there a reason why it took this long to reinstate that right?

Mr Pettersson: I will hand to officials.

Ms Rule: There are a couple of things. The first thing I would say is the report does not say that there were human rights abuses in Bimberi; it says that there are ways in which we can enhance our compliance with the Human Rights Act. We absolutely welcome the report and there are always better ways to do things in Bimberi. But, as I said earlier, there has been an ongoing need to balance the security requirements in Bimberi with the needs of the young people who are in our custody. Those security settings are under constant review, and we made the decision to reinstate physical contact at visits when we felt we were best able to balance those security requirements.

MS BARRY: So two years was a reasonable time?

Ms Rule: As I said, those settings are constantly under review, and we have made the decision to change those settings.

MS BARRY: The ACT Custodial Inspector's report mentioned human rights abuses. What plans do you have to ensure that it does not take two years for children to be able

to hug their parents?

Ms Rule: They are able to hug their parents.

MS BARRY: It took two years before they were able to. What plans do you have to make sure that that does not occur again?

Mr Pettersson: We have the settings in place right now, and I think that they are appropriate.

MS BARRY: So that is the plan? Okay. The official visitors report raised concerns about medication administration treatment, treatment of disease and footwear issues. They also raised concerns that rehabilitation and reintegration into is not embedded due to staff culture and risk adverse approach to safety and security. Can you comment on whether these issues may be related to the higher than average recidivism rate?

Mr Pettersson: I appreciate the line of questioning. It is somewhat challenging for us to answer in light of the fact that we have not yet provided a government response. So we are somewhat pre-empting this process. But officials might be able to shed some light on the broad topic.

Ms Rule: I am not sure we can draw cause and effect around some of those issues around medication management and shoes and recidivism. I am not quite sure that we would have data or information to suggest that those things would lead to increased recidivism. They are issues that have happened within Bimberi and have been raised by external oversight bodies. Those external oversight bodies have a critically important role to play in ensuring that the work that we undertake in Bimberi is undertaken to the appropriate standards. So we are always to receive that feedback. We take it seriously and we act upon it appropriately. But I do not think you can draw a link to recidivism.

MS BARRY: I think the link there is the rehabilitation and reintegration aspects of it. Obviously, as we know, when you do not provide the proper care for children, it does lead to recidivism issues where social housing is a problem and education is a problem. In all indicators where you have problems, that does lead to recidivism issues, and where we have rehabilitation as well it does lead to recidivism issues. I will move on, but when you say you cannot draw that correlation it is quite concerning to me. But, anyway, I will move on. Minister, what are you putting in place to ensure compliance with human rights in Bimberi?

Mr Pettersson: I believe Bimberi is in compliance, but I will hand to officials to get to the line of questioning based on the inspector's report.

Ms Rule: As I said, we welcome the reports of the inspector, official visitors and other oversight individuals or agencies that work within Bimberi. We take the issues that they raise seriously, and that includes the Human Rights Commission. We are in constant contact with staff of the Human Rights Commission when they visit Bimberi. As I said, we think they have a critically important role to play in ensuring that we are compliant and that that compliance is best practice. As I have already acknowledged, we can always improve things in Bimberi, and we look forward to continuing to work with those oversight agencies to ensure that our compliance is best practice.

MS BARRY: The report also says that complaints take a long time to action, maybe because there are some opaque settings in Bimberi that mean that staff are probably not always across what complaints are put forward. What are you doing in terms of managing the complaints handling process in Bimberi, noting the report?

Mr Pettersson: I will have to defer to officials to speak to that process, but we cannot pre-empt the government response to that report.

Ms Rule: There are a range of complaint settings both within Bimberi and external to Bimberi. Ms Brendas can probably talk about some of the specifics. We do have a quite detailed framework that is publicly available. When people write to me and say, “I am concerned about this issue,” we continue to try and build an understanding of what the mechanisms are for people to lodge complaints so that they are getting responded to in a timely manner, that we have visibility of them and that we are accountable for them. There is a whole range of activities, but perhaps Ms Brendas can talk about those a little bit more.

Ms Brendas: Internal to Bimberi there is the complaints policy and process. Young people have an opportunity to directly make a complaint to a youth worker, team leader or a unit manager or anyone in fact operationally. They can talk to that person and formalise that complaint in writing. There is also the CSD complaints policy. Anything over a level 1 complaint will go through the policy, so it would be external to Bimberi. As Catherine has mentioned, our oversight agencies attend on a weekly basis. Young people also have access to official visitors and public advocates. They can talk to them on the phone—they are private calls—and they can make a complaint through those avenues as well. We can then address them as they come in.

MS BARRY: Do you have stats on the number of complaints that you have received and how long it has taken to respond to them?

Ms Sabellico: I am the acting Director-General for Community Services Directorate and I have also read and acknowledge the privilege statement. In terms of the number of complaints, I can give you the detail about the complaints received across Children, Youth and Families as a division. In the 2023-24 financial year we had 150 reported complaints, and 65 of those were the level 1 complaints that Tina was talking about, which are best addressed locally and trying to find the solution locally to be able to support resolution.

Those that then get raised up to level 2 go to our independent complaints and client services area. We had 95 of those. I do not have for those numbers, though, how long they took to complete. But, usually, when complaints become level 2 they are very comprehensively reviewed and considered. That could take up to six weeks, depending on the issue, to be able to finalise, because they independently review all information available to them and check for the process and the decision-making rationale around those. But I can provide you on notice that information about the length of time for each of those 95.

MS BARRY: Thank you. Is it a policy that it would take six weeks or it is just general practice?

Ms Sabellico: It is just general practice. Depending on the complexity, sometimes it can be shorter and other times longer. But, on average, it is about six weeks to be able to do a really good in-depth independent review.

MS BARRY: Thank you; that is useful.

THE CHAIR: I have one final question before we wrap up—I know we will be a few minutes late—on the persistent over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. I understand we have a dedicated First Nations team within government for kids going into care and their families. But it has been put to me that kids who went into care before that team was established do not have contact with the team. Is that the case?

Ms Sabellico: The First Nations team was established to look at how we best address all new matters coming through. They have been in place for over 18 months. It started off as a small team in order to test and approach that has not been used before, which was looking at how the First Nations team comes together to work on reports to stop them from coming into the child protection system. The team has done significantly well and we have continued then to build on the resource in order to be able to address the demand at that front end.

In terms of addressing for the issues of those that were already in the system and already allocated to case workers, we build systems around how to better support for decision-making, including having our senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff involved in the decision-making process in guiding those decisions. Then then provide live learning experiences for people to consider the true cultural aspects of the matters. Any time that we are looking at taking a matter to court, it needs to go through a collective committee of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to review and have a case conversation about. Then, similarly, whenever a change in case direction would occur in terms of, for example, thinking about looking at restoration, again, it must be consulted on in that area. We have lots of Aboriginal specialist positions built into our structures to be able to address supporting, training, development and uplifting the clinical expertise of our staff as it relates to cultural capability.

THE CHAIR: With that First Nations team, is there a commitment to retaining and growing that team over time; it not being cut or reduced?

Ms Sabellico: We continue to have a look at it on an ongoing basis. In fact, this morning, I met with the chair of the Our Booris, Our Way committee to look at the actions that we are considering in terms of growth now that we have some more information on data and numbers.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I might put some questions on notice about how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in the out-of-home care area within government but also in the community sector, unless you want to answer it—

Ms Sabellico: I can tell you our staffing, but I can take on notice the NGO staffing.

THE CHAIR: Do you speak about your staffing?

Ms Sabellico: In Children, Youth and Families, as at the end of January, we have 39 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, which is about 88.6 per cent of our staffing complement.

Ms Rule: Chair, I also have some data from one of your previous questions about the number of nights where there were more than 20 young people in Bimberi. In the 2023-24 financial year there were 19 nights where there were more than 20 young people in Bimberi.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS BARRY: What happens to a First Nations child who has nobody to take parental responsibility who is arrested at 2 am in the morning? What happens in that scenario?

Ms Sabellico: We have an after-hours service, and contact can be made through the after-hours service. We work closely with our NGO providers, who provide the care arrangements. They also have after an after-hours service. We can always look at what is an emergency arrangement that could be put in place until case workers can get involved in the morning and have a look at doing some further family finding, working on what their appropriate case planning would be for that child, young person and their family, and what the arrangements are that we can look at in terms of how to work with the family around looking at what is in the best interests of that child.

MS BARRY: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. 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 days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*.

Hearing suspended from 11.52 am to 12.00 pm.

Appearances:

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

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Evans, Ms Jacinta, Executive Group Manager, Strategic Policy

Yates, Ms Brooke, Executive Branch Manager, Housing and Inclusive Policy Branch, Strategic Policy

Conway, Ms Sarah, Senior Director, Seniors and Veterans

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2023-24. The committee will now hear from the Minister for Seniors and Veterans. We welcome Ms Suzanne Orr MLA, Minister for Seniors and Veterans, and officials.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When witnesses take a question on notice, please use the words, “I will take that question on notice”, which will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

I remind witnesses of the protection and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. When you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and agree to comply with it. We are not inviting opening statements; so we will now proceed to questions.

This is probably going to be outside of your remit, but I am going to ask it anyway. I understand our aged-care assessment turnaround times are the worst in the country. Is this a matter of concern for the area of seniors and veterans? What is being done to address it?

Ms Orr: Thank you, Mr Emerson. I have read and understood the privilege statement. Mr Emerson, just with the phrasing of “is this a matter of concern”, I would seek your guidance on whether that is asking me to express a matter of opinion. But I think I can go to the substance of your question, which is around aged-care assessments and how we look at those and monitor those. I might hand to Ms Rule, because it is quite a complex area of shared responsibility with the commonwealth.

Ms Rule: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The conduct of aged-care assessments is the remit of the commonwealth. That is conducted by the commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. My understanding is that they contract private sector providers to deliver those assessments.

THE CHAIR: In the ACT, I think they contract to the ACT government.

Ms Rule: In some instances, yes.

THE CHAIR: I think we are the only jurisdiction where the government is the only supplier to be able to contract.

Ms Rule: That may be the case, but the performance of those is subject to a range of factors, including the funding available, the market availability and demand. As to concerns about how we relate to other jurisdictions, I think that actually is a commonwealth matter, not an ACT government matter.

THE CHAIR: Actually, I think the commonwealth has been applying pressure on the ACT government to increase its performance in this area, as we are the only jurisdiction where the government is the only contractor. Everywhere else there is a competitive market. So the federal government can say, “We are not going to use this contractor in these cases.”

Ms Rule: I have certainly had no discussions with the commonwealth about this matter.

THE CHAIR: Do the assessments sit with Health? That is a genuine question.

Ms Evans: I think it would be Health.

Ms Rule: I am getting nods. Ms Conway, do you want to come to the table, if you have—

Ms Conway: I am Senior Director, Office for Seniors and Veterans, and I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Arrangements between the commonwealth and the ACT government would sit within the Health portfolio. So that question would be better directed to the health minister.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR HANSON: With regard to veterans, the report, on page 28, says that the establishment of a Veterans Wellbeing Centre in the ACT is in progress. My understanding is that there is a facility in New South Wales that has been established with RSL LifeCare. Is a centre going to be established in the ACT, or are we talking about actually accessing New South Wales?

Ms Orr: Thank you, Mr Hanson. I know you have got a really keen interest in this topic. We have had a few discussions so far, and I am happy to keep engaging with you on it. I will pass to the directorate to run through what is in the actual report, but I can certainly clarify the government’s position on this. My understanding is, as you have pointed out, that the centre is in Queanbeyan, which is a commonwealth-funded centre. It is for the ACT region. So it is intended to service ACT veterans and their families as well.

I appreciate that there has been a lot of feedback from the veteran community that they would like something located within Canberra and not always having to go to Queanbeyan. That is something that the ACT government is committed to looking at doing and how we can support that, which is why we had the commitment to put in

place a hub. We are working through how that could complement or build on the RSL Queanbeyan hub that is there.

A bit of discussion has happened, Mr Hanson, on how we can line everything up and not duplicate what they are doing but make sure that we are providing a good range of services to everyone. It is early days for those discussions, so we do not have a huge amount of outcomes to necessarily tell you. But we are more than happy—because you are particularly very engaged with this area—to keep the discussion going with you. I will pass to the directorate for more information in relation to the specific part of the annual report.

Ms Conway: I can confirm that the temporary hub in Queanbeyan that the commonwealth government has contracted RSL LifeCare for is now open. It opened at the beginning of January. There is a commitment from RSL LifeCare to have services available and delivered within the ACT borders. There is active discussion occurring between RSL LifeCare and ESOs and particularly with our Ministerial Advisory Council for Veterans and their Families, as to what those local needs look like. They are working through identifying a suitable site and hope to have an update for us within the coming months.

MR HANSON: Do you know where the permanent site will be? Is a new building being built in Queanbeyan?

Ms Orr: The permanent one in New South Wales; is that the Queanbeyan one?

Ms Conway: It is not a new building. It is refurbishment of what was the RSL Queanbeyan sub-branch. The ground floor is where the temporary site is, which is where the sub-branch is located. The permanent site will be on level 1, and that is due to open midyear.

MR HANSON: In terms of an ACT hub that you are considering and planning for, have you looked at where that would be?

Ms Orr: As Ms Conway pointed out, there are discussions ongoing at the moment to best identify the needs and wants of the veteran community, as to what would be provided within the ACT. I think the actual site would be guided a little bit by what comes out of that. It is a bit premature to say, “This will be the site.” We need to understand what it is that we need to find a suitable site for.

MR HANSON: Would that be a purely ACT funded and operated centre or would it be in conjunction with the federal government?

Ms Orr: Again, it is probably a little bit premature to say. Referring to the previous conversation, the hub in Queanbeyan is also to service ACT veterans. It will be in partnership. I believe that is the model we are looking at.

MR HANSON: A satellite or something like that?

Ms Conway: Yes, that is correct.

Ms Orr: Again, Mr Hanson, it is dependent on what comes out of the services, the needs and the wants of the community.

MR HANSON: Is there anything in the budget yet?

Ms Orr: We cannot appropriate funding for something when we do not know what it looks like yet. Watch this space, Mr Hanson.

MR HANSON: Do you have a timeframe?

Ms Orr: The timeframe will be determined by the outcomes of the discussions that are going on. If you want me to give you an actual date, that it will be by this date, I am probably not in a position to do that yet. We need to have those discussions around what this looks like and what is a suitable site. We need to work through that before we could say, “This is the date on which it will be delivered.”

MR HANSON: Broadly, Minister, are we talking about by the end of this term or in a decade? When will we see it in the broad?

Ms Orr: Mr Hanson, I am not trying to be unhelpful; I am trying to engage positively. The most concrete answer I could give you at the moment is: as soon as possible.

MS TOUGH: I note that the annual report included outcomes for seniors and veterans grants over the 2023-24 period. Can you please give us an idea of the process for administering these grants and how the decisions are made?

Ms Orr: I am happy to pass to the directorate on this one.

Ms Rule: I have some broad comments, and my colleagues can jump in, as they see fit. I note that there is a grants framework that we use. It usually involves, for a new grant program, establishing a set of grant guidelines. What are the grants? What are they for? What are the amounts of money that might be available? What might be the performance measurements? There are those kinds of things about what the grants are for.

We then publish a grant opportunity and the eligible organisations, or individuals in some instances, can apply for those grants. Those grants are then assessed against the criteria and paid out accordingly. That is broadly the grants process. I do not know whether I have missed anything important.

Ms Conway: No, that is correct. The only thing I would add is that, when establishing our grants assessment panels, we do consider the representation of who those members are, and we do engage members of our ministerial advisory council in the respective portfolio, acknowledging the expertise they have in the portfolio and what they can bring to that process.

MS TOUGH: How many grants were funded?

Ms Conway: In 2023-24?

MS TOUGH: Yes.

Ms Conway: In the Seniors Grant Program, 14 grants were funded. In the veterans portfolio, eight applications were funded, as well as some additional funding that was allocated from that field to the Veterans and Families Expo.

MS TOUGH: In addition to the eight grant applications, there was also funding given to an expo?

Ms Conway: To the expo; within the grant funding and budget envelope, yes.

MISS NUTTALL: I want to ask about aged-care respite. In light of the recently announced closure of the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre, what plans does the ACT government have to ensure that there is sufficient availability of respite aged care?

Ms Rule: This is a combined responsibility of the commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care and the ACT Health Directorate, or perhaps Canberra Health Services—the health portfolio. CSD does not provide aged-care respite.

MISS NUTTALL: Given the responsibility for seniors, what oversight do you have regarding making sure that there are sufficient facilities? Do you play a coordinating role?

Ms Rule: No, we do not.

MISS NUTTALL: Given that Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith has stated that this is an issue for the federal government, and you have very kindly backed that up, what conversations have you had with your federal colleagues regarding continuity of care and sufficient access?

Ms Rule: In terms of Community Services Directorate officials, we have not had conversations with the commonwealth about this matter. It may be something that my colleagues in the health portfolio have had discussions about, at an officials level, but I do not have visibility of that.

MISS NUTTALL: I understand from an ABC article that the ACT government previously provided funding to the Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre. Do you know how much funding was provided previously?

Ms Rule: That is in the Health portfolio.

MS CASTLEY: Do you have any idea of how many supported housing places are currently used by seniors in the ACT?

Ms Rule: We would have to take that question on notice. I do not have that data available right now, Ms Castley.

Ms Orr: Is that something that would be held by Housing?

MS CASTLEY: It is possible; I am not sure. We will have a look at what data we have

available on that.

MS CASTLEY: Do you have some information about the demand for supported housing places for seniors and what that looks like at the moment? How many units are required to fully satisfy that seniors cohort in Canberra for housing?

Ms Rule: Again, I do not have any of my Housing officials with me. We can take that question on notice.

Ms Orr: Ms Castley, in answering the questions, do not be surprised if it comes back from the minister for housing. We might have to redirect that one.

Ms Rule: Yes, it is a housing portfolio matter, not a—

MS CASTLEY: I understand that. I thought that, with the seniors hat on, there would be some consideration of the cost of living and the housing situation for Canberrans. I am wondering what data you have with regard to that, whether you have undertaken any work to understand the cost of housing for seniors and what work you are doing.

Ms Rule: Again, with housing, regardless of the cohort, it is a responsibility for Housing ACT. I do not have any of those officers with me right now. We can take that on notice and see what data we have available.

MS CARRICK: With respect to respite care, do you know how many beds there are for respite care for seniors across Canberra and where they are located?

Ms Rule: No, we do not. Again, respite is a responsibility of ACT Health, not of the Community Services Directorate. Our role, as it relates to seniors, is, broadly, to provide policy advice to government, to support the seniors advisory council that we have in place and to administer the relevant grant programs. We do not have a responsibility as it relates to respite, so I cannot shed any light on that matter.

MS CARRICK: The seniors advisory council is not responsible for ensuring that Canberrans have somewhere to go, when they need to?

Ms Rule: No, they are not. They are responsible for providing advice to the minister for seniors on a range of issues that they raise and as they see fit. They may choose to raise that as an issue with the relevant ministers, but they set their own work program. This is not a specific issue that is highlighted in their terms of reference.

MR HANSON: Going back to veterans, have you taken on any actions arising from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide? Are there any issues there that you are addressing?

Ms Orr: Mr Hanson, I will ask the directorate to run through a little bit more information on this. Particularly with the recommendations that went to responsibilities within the states and territories, where support would be needed for those, it is fair to say that we are still working through what that looks like and what that involves. We are engaging very much with the commonwealth on it, to figure out how we can start to work through that bit. Again, Mr Hanson, it is very early days and we still need to

figure it out. But the work is in train.

Ms Yates: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The royal commission handed down its findings late last year. The commonwealth government provided its response in December. In the main, the recommendations are within the remit of the commonwealth government. There are approximately 14 that require the support of states and territories. We are currently working through with the commonwealth, state and territory committee, which is the official working group under the Veterans Ministerial Council, to determine what the priorities are for implementing those.

In terms of an ACT government response, the Ministerial Advisory Council for Veterans and their Families are preparing a report for the minister, which we expect in the next month or so, highlighting what they see as their priorities for the ACT government response to the royal commission. Once that is presented to Minister Orr, she will take that through cabinet for the consideration of government.

MR HANSON: With respect to any of those recommendations, will the federal government provide any funding?

Ms Yates: That is still—

MR HANSON: Not clear yet?

Ms Yates: Not clear yet, as we are working through what the priorities are and how we implement them.

MR HANSON: Can you give me a bit of a sense of what those priorities are? Is it in housing or mental health? What are we talking about?

Ms Yates: At the moment the clear priority coming through from the federal minister is around data sharing and what states and territories can share between each other and with the commonwealth to further the wellbeing and the response to veterans and their families.

MR HANSON: In terms of the ministerial advisory council, what is the process for selecting membership?

Ms Yates: I would have to defer to Ms Conway or Ms Evans on that.

Ms Evans: I can speak to that, Mr Hanson. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. For all ministerial advisory councils, it is an open expression of interest process. We would usually have a process either for some members to finish at a particular time or the entire council to finish at a particular time. We try to rotate it, so that it is not the whole council at once.

The number of positions available would be advertised. The terms of reference for the council would be put out publicly. People are then able to apply. Consideration is then made by a panel of people who consider any conflicts of interest, and who can put to the minister some recommendations around who would be well positioned. Of course, we take into account the range of experiences and skills that each person would bring

to that council.

Ms Orr: Mr Hanson, for clarity, I have not actually appointed anyone to the council in this term. The membership is the existing membership from the previous term.

MR HANSON: As you would be aware, there are a range of ESOs in the ACT—large ones like the RSL, all the way down to smaller ones. They do a body of work as well. How do you de-conflict that? You might have an individual representative who is be a member of various ESOs, and you have the ESO making representations that might be at odds. How do you balance the advice coming from the ministerial council against advice coming from the RSL or other groups?

Ms Evans: It is one of the great benefits of ministerial councils. In this case, for the veterans council, we do not have identified positions. When we advertise, we do not say, “We want some people from particular ESOs,” or anything like that. Some members are representatives of ESOs as well as representing themselves as individuals. The benefit is that you have a group of people who can consider what is being canvassed and what the priorities look like.

We would still, in all the different portfolios, get representation from individual organisations that have particular priorities. They will often go directly to the minister. The decision-making on the recommendations is considered by the council in its entirety, so you have some balancing around individuals who are representing their own experience as a veteran or a family member, versus people who are engaged in ESOs.

Ms Orr: Ms Evans, could you also talk about some of the conflict of interest processes that are in place for the council? I think that goes to what Mr Hanson is after.

MR HANSON: The issue I am going to is that you have a chain of command through these ESOs. You join associations, they do a lot of work and they represent. Someone might be a member of the RSL and says, “I’m a member of the RSL; I’ll take that on.” They do not actually have a statutory position within that organisation. How do you make sure that issues of the RSLs, for example—there are others—are represented separately rather than by someone perhaps purporting to be a member of the RSL and who think therefore that that gives them the ability to speak for the RSL, when perhaps it does not?

Ms Evans: The chair has a role in that, Mr Hanson, in the sense of making sure that all the voices that are heard are collectively considered. As I say, certainly for ESOs, the RSL and others, they would represent themselves strongly outside the process of the veterans ministerial council. It is quite clear, usually, what they may have as priorities at that particular time. That, of course, will be taken into account within the ministerial council, but so will the other voices.

MR HANSON: Who is the chair at the moment?

Ms Evans: The chair at the moment is Nicole Longley.

MS CASTLEY: I have some questions about seniors and cost of living. Obviously, one of the concerns, when I am out and about, is cost of living. We know that things

cost a lot in Canberra compared to other jurisdictions, but the level of support is a little different. I know there are some people who are aware that, if they moved out of Canberra—they do not want to do that because this is their home—they could probably get better assistance elsewhere. I am wondering how the government determines the appropriate level of support for seniors. What work do you undertake to look at that in the ACT?

Ms Orr: Ms Castley, that is quite a broad question that would go across all portfolio areas. It would not just be the seniors and veterans portfolio. In saying that, I will ask Ms Rule to provide a little bit of information as to how we would engage across the whole of government to represent the interests and needs of seniors in making these broader decisions.

Ms Rule: There are a number of mechanisms whereby we engage externally from government and then across government on this area of policy. For example, at the moment we are in the middle of preparing advice to government on budget options. We discuss a whole range of things with ministers about what their priorities might be, the priorities of the government. We also have a process whereby community groups can make submissions through the budget process to raise particular issues that might require attention. Again, we would advise the minister of those and suggest possible options for consideration in the budget process.

We take advice from the ministerial advisory councils about what they are seeing as the issues, and feed those in. We also get feedback from a range of other stakeholders, service providers and others about the types of issues that they are seeing. Again, all of that gets provided to government as policy advice regarding the kinds of options that they could consider and what funding decisions may be made through the budget process.

MS CASTLEY: Seniors from across the board and community groups would explain to you what they need with regard to housing; do you send them off to the housing people, as you have just said?

Ms Rule: It depends what issue they are raising. Certainly, in all of the portfolio areas within CSD, including housing, we take representations from a range of people. Housing is a common thread across many of the vulnerable cohorts or particular segments of the ACT community that we deal with. We often talk to government about the types of housing priorities that might exist for different groups within the community.

MS CASTLEY: Do you undertake effectiveness analysis to understand if the level of support for seniors is going to those who need it and is enough? Is that what you do — with our seniors hat on? I am just trying to understand. Obviously, seniors fit into everywhere. You guys represent all of them. Do you look into the level of care they get?

Ms Rule: For example, if, through that sort of stakeholder consultation process, people were identifying a particular issue as it relates to seniors, be it health or housing, we would work with our colleagues in different directorates across government to advise government on those particular things. In the Office for Seniors, like many of the offices

that exist within CSD, we have a coordinating role. We coordinate across government to provide policy advice to the Minister for Seniors but also to government more broadly about issues that affect seniors.

MS CASTLEY: So do you collect any data on how many seniors are accessing concessions and hardship schemes or programs?

Ms Evans: That would be through CMTEDD, the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, because that is where those concessions are.

MS CASTLEY: Great. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: How many of the 33 actions in the government's 2020-2024 Age-Friendly City Plan have been implemented?

Ms Evans: Let me have a look. It might just take one second to just check that exact detail, Mr Emerson. Do you want to move to another question and come back to me?

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Ms Evans: I do not want to waste the time of the committee while I work out the numbers.

THE CHAIR: I have a question about this topic. But if it is going to sit with you, I am going to distract you. My read is that consultation is underway to inform the development of a new Age-Friendly City Plan for the next 10 years.

Ms Evans: Yes.

THE CHAIR: When will that plan be delivered, noting the last one has expired already?

Ms Evans: Mr Emerson, I can now answer the question on the number of actions. In the last plan there were 33 actions and 22 were complete as at the fourth progress report, which was tabled in the Assembly last year. So 22 are complete, 10 are in progress and will continue and one is yet to commence. We have started coordinating for a final report. It is due for release this year. Of course, with the change of government and the consideration of new commitments and priorities for government, we are just doing that work. Prior to the change of government, there was a significant amount of consideration given to what a new plan would look like. We have the work underway, and we will continue to do that into this term of government.

THE CHAIR: I note the last report was tabled in May last year. So it has been a while. That was on progress up until December of last year. I understand that an election can get in the way of things, but this looks like just tracking progress on a plan that was already announced and underway. Do we have a timeline for when the final progress report is going to be?

Ms Evans: Annual progress reports are the commitment. If it was in May, then it will be due again in May.

Ms Orr: Mr Emerson, for your information, even though it is just tracking against what is there, I would still have to take it to cabinet for approval to release publicly. So I think when Ms Evans is talking about the change of government and impacts, it is just getting into those processes and allowing those timelines to happen.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Conversations are underway to inform the development of a new plan but we have not actually reported on the last plan. What is the overlap? I am trying to understand. At the last check-in point 22 were completed, which is great, and there were 10 in progress and one had not commenced. Will those 11 be carried forward? It just seems to me hard to write a new plan if you have not actually acquitted the last one.

Ms Evans: That is a good question. I think this is always something that we take into account when we have a longer-term plan. Sometimes the priorities change and the community will give us the feedback when we go to consultation that, of those 10, “these three are still the highest priority we have”, or you know whatever. All of that is taken into account. If something is not commenced, there could be a reason for it. It could have changed completely the way in which we would approach a particular thing.

Usually, the expectation would be that anything that was carried over from a previous plan, either will be renamed or rearticulated in a new plan. Or if the community feedback is that what we have achieved to date is actually sufficient, we might not need to rearticulate it in the same way. A preferred practice would be to be able to name it as complete. But it really does depend on the longer-term ones. Some of our plans and strategies that we have in place are four, five or 10 years. Things change over that period. So we would be looking at those closely as we go into the consideration of a future plan, which of course will be for the minister to decide what that might look like and how that might come forward.

Ms Orr: Ms Evans, it might be helpful to better articulate the strategies and how the plans sit under that and how all the different timelines and processes fit together.

Ms Evans: Yes. As in the—

Ms Orr: As in we have a strategy which will sit over a period of time which will be longer than the plan. Maybe just correct me, if I get anything wrong, Ms Evans.

Ms Evans: Yes. I think the strategy and the plan are probably the same thing. Basically what we would do is consult with the community and consider what the highest priorities. Then, under that, there may be action plans. There may be work plans specific to the recommendations that we are putting or the actions that we are putting forward—if that is what you are referring to, Minister.

Ms Orr: Yes. So, essentially, these shorter-term action plans are there to actually make sure that we are tracking along. But, overall it is not to say that everything necessarily has to be done by a certain point in time. It is an accountability measure to make sure that you are working towards it.

THE CHAIR: In this case, this is a four-year plan and it is going to be replaced by a 10-year plan. So I do not imagine that there is a 24-year strategy that sits above that.

This might be one where it is one in the same. I know what you are referring to where we have these overarching strategies. I would be curious to know whether, in the final report on the progress of the plan that ended in December, indication be given to these items that were incomplete and they are being carried over? Do you do like a clear line here, incomplete, and then the next—

Ms Evans: As we have not got a final format, I would not like to mislead you and say we will definitely do it this way. But the usual process would be to reflect on the previous plan, outline the number that were not complete or were at a particular point in time and those that are being carried over or rearticulated within the new plan. That would be the usual approach. I would expect a similar—

THE CHAIR: I have one more question on this, which is about the one item that had not been commenced as of December 2023, which was the Nature Prescriptions Program. The reason given was that this initiative had not progressed due to competing priorities and the ACT government at that time was reevaluating this initiative. Do you know what the result of that re-evaluation was?

Ms Evans: I do not, Mr Emerson. I would have to take it on notice. EPSDD had responsibility for that particular item, because the strategy is a whole-of-government approach. But I am happy to find out and provide more information.

THE CHAIR: Nature Prescriptions is about health professionals prescribing spending time in nature, which is something that the Royal Australian College of GPs recently highlighted is a very beneficial practice. Are you sure that would have sat with EPSDD?

Ms Evans: I do believe that EPSDD were the lead directorate in terms of that.

Ms Orr: Health definitely had input to it. I remember sitting through annual report hearings where this came up in conversations.

Ms Evans: Yes, I am getting the nod from officials.

Ms Orr: So yes, while it—

THE CHAIR: That seems strange.

Ms Orr: While it predates my time as the minister for this portfolio, I do remember sitting on your side of the table, Mr Emerson, and having a discussion about this in various annual reports and budget hearings. Certainly it was one of those ones where it had to work across a few different areas.

THE CHAIR: Thanks. So you will take on notice whether the evaluation led to a decision not to pursue that item?

Ms Evans: Yes, I will take on notice the status of that item.

THE CHAIR: That particular item?

Ms Evans: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CASTLEY: I have a question about workforce. I know that some people who are retired are very happy with that decision and others would like to get back into the workforce on a part-time basis. I know that many private employers would welcome interest from local people who want to get back into work. I am wondering if the government has looked at this issue and considered what it could do to support businesses who are struggling with the labour shortage but also older Canberrans who do want to take on some work. Is that something that you have been looking into?

Ms Rule: It is not something that I am aware of us providing policy advice to government on, Ms Castley.

MS CASTLEY: Okay. When was the last time the government reviewed the eligibility for support, like discounted rates and the ACT seniors card for seniors who do choose to reengage in part-time work?

Ms Rule: Certainly the seniors card is not a means-tested card. So there is no impact. It is aged based, as are many of those concessions. Issues around broader concessions on rates and other things are questions for CMTEDD, not CSD. But, with many of those schemes, it is simply that you meet that qualifying age, rather than means testing in regards to income.

Ms Evans: Just to clarify, Ms Castley, there is a working hours eligibility for the seniors card, though. To receive the seniors card you need to be working for less than 20 hours per week. So, whilst it is not means tested, the intention is that it is not people in full employment receiving those concessions.

MS CASTLEY: Okay; so 20 hours?

Ms Evans: Yes.

MS CASTLEY: Are you considering any positive incentives to encourage seniors to get to work in that 20-hour bracket? Is it something that you guys look at?

Ms Evans: In terms of the broader government response, we certainly do have encouragement through our EBA and other elements of our workplace agreements for older people to be engaged in work. That includes the flexible working conditions that we have. Part-time hours and all those kinds of elements—sorry to say again—would be under the CMTEDD employment portfolio.

MS CASTLEY: Thank you.

MS TOUGH: How is the preparation of a Wellbeing Framework for Veterans and their Families progressing in the ACT?

Ms Orr: I will pass to the directorate on that one.

Ms Yates: Thank you for the question. The work around the Veterans Wellbeing

Framework is taking into account the findings of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. We are very much looking to the report that comes through from the Ministerial Advisory Council for Veterans and their Families in terms of what they see as their priorities coming out of the royal commission and then the government's decision, and taking that into account before preparing the Veterans and Wellbeing Framework. In conversation with MACVF, we understand that they would like the focus of that to be on veterans and their families, and we will look to include that in the scope. But the exact timing of the development of the framework will be contingent on our consideration of the royal commission findings.

MS TOUGH: Thank you. That was going to be my follow up: are the royal commission findings being used to support that?

Ms Yates: Yes.

MS TOUGH: Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: Can you confirm that the government will fully support and implement the Veterans Wellbeing Framework in its entirety?

Ms Orr: Miss Nuttall, are you able to help me out with what you mean by “fully support”? I am not quite sure—

MISS NUTTALL: Like the intents of the framework as it is being put together and the sort of feedback you have received. Will you fully implement? I am probably not phrasing that very well.

Ms Orr: The framework is in place, and we will continue to work to the framework. I think that is the best answer I can give you on that.

MISS NUTTALL: That is good. This question might actually in the context of this be considered for Health. What work and accommodations are being done for older Canberrans to access public transport? That might sit in transport space, but are there any—

Ms Rule: That is a Transport Canberra and City Services matter, Miss Nuttall.

MISS NUTTALL: So there is no sort of coordinating—

Ms Orr: Just on that, I know Transport Canberra have been doing quite a bit in the way of looking at how they run their transport operations. But COTA has raised some concerns and feedback that they have been hearing from their cohort. They have made those representations to me, and I have spoken to the minister. I think that is an example of the role we can play in doing that advocacy. But as far as operationalising those, we do not actually hold the systems; they fall within the remit of the transport minister.

MISS NUTTALL: I am glad to hear that you have made representations, though. In that case, do you have much oversight of the over-55 clubs and the associated amenities? Are you the point of contact in government for the over-55 clubs?

Ms Rule: We do not have any particular relationships in place. I think we are broadly aware that those clubs exist. Depending on what they are for and what they do, they are eligible to apply for grant funding and the likes. So we have some contact with them in that context. But there is not a particular role that we play with those clubs.

MISS NUTTALL: Okay.

MR HANSON: I have a couple of questions on the ACT memorial, located just over the road. Firstly, it has been subject to a fair bit of vandalism. Is there anything being done to prevent that, or are we just sort of waiting for it to get vandalised and then repair each time?

Ms Orr: Ms Evans looks like she wants to respond to that.

Ms Evans: Apologies, Mr Hanson, but memorials sit with TCCS. Memorial policy is not with CSD. So I am not aware of what actions are being taken to manage the vandalism.

MR HANSON: Sure.

Ms Evans: It is with City Services.

MR HANSON: On another issue that you may have an interest in: it does not seem to be very well used. I never see any activity there. I never see any memorial sorts of events happening at that memorial. To be frank, I think probably 99 per cent of people who walk past do not understand that it is a memorial. Is there anything that is going to be done to enhance its use and awareness as a memorial?

Ms Orr: I can get Ms Evans to speak to that.

Ms Evans: Mr Hanson, if you are interested, we could speak to some of the local commemorations and how we engage with that, but probably not specifically to that site. You have raised awareness and that that would be a useful site for us to engage with more for local commemorations. That is something we could certainly take into account and seek the minister's views on whether those—

MR HANSON: I know that there a bunch of memorials across the ACT, but this one was developed fairly recently, specifically to commemorate ACT service men and women. We are not using it. People are not aware of it. It just sits there. To be frank, I think it is a lovely piece of art, but anyone walking past it is not going to realise it is a memorial. Are we doing anything about that?

Ms Orr: I think it is fair to say that the directorate will work with the community. As we have already pointed out, there is also a large number of groups that will also have their own focus of various places across the ACT. The directorate will facilitate and enable them to use various memorials and other bits and pieces across Canberra—halls and community facilities, for example. While it is somewhat dependent, I guess, on people coming forward and making a request to use that, if you have any ideas that you would like to share with me, my office or the directorate about how that could be better utilised—it sounds like your vision might be to make that a little bit more regarded

within the community and known within the community—I am more than open to hearing those.

MR HANSON: Did you have something further to add, Ms Conway?

Ms Conway: Only if you wanted to hear about how we use commemoration sites across the territory?

MR HANSON: Yes, sure.

Ms Conway: Through our Ministerial Advisory Council for Veterans and their Families, they do hold a number of local commemorations. It is of particular importance to the council to be able to have local events that are not the national services that are held at the War Memorial, particularly for Anzac Day, noting that a lot of individuals travel back to where they last served for commemorations at that time. The traditional approach that we have taken over the last number of years, particularly since COVID, is having members individually lay wreaths at local sites of significance. We undertake that and have some social media that flows from that to be an education piece for the Canberra community to be able to be familiar with local sites in their region and increase their awareness of those sites. So it is an opportunity that we could look to use the memorial across the road in that.

MR HANSON: Sure. With particularly older veterans it is quite difficult sometimes to go to the War Memorial for the dawn service, and the parking is difficult, as you would appreciate. So, for example, a bunch of veterans from the southside or Woden area will go to Eastern Park. There is one in Crace, but what do we have on the north side of Canberra?

Ms Conway: Individual members from the council have identified sites that they choose to lay wreaths at. For Anzac Day, traditionally, we have—

MR HANSON: I am thinking about the veteran community more generally, not just members of the council. If you are 82 and you live in Gungahlin, and coming all the way to the War Memorial is pretty difficult, is there a site there for veterans? Have you had any representations from veterans about a north Canberra memorial?

Ms Orr: Mr Hanson, I think it is fair to say some of the veterans groups up the Gungahlin way have said that they would appreciate something. But, in having those conversations, they have also acknowledged that it is not just as straightforward as saying, “We would like this and this is what we are going to do.” They are having a bit of a chat about looking at options for what would be our role and whether it is possible for us to do it and just weighing up all the various avenues that are possible. But, yes, I have had it raised with me that people would appreciate having a memorial in their regional area as well as the ones that we have supporting across the whole of the city.

MR HANSON: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: What is the government doing to improve digital literacy for seniors to enhance their access to online services?

Ms Conway: The Council on the Ageing ACT, which is the peak body for older Canberrans, does run a Get IT program, which runs year-round, through a number of different initiatives. They have a very strong uptake, particularly since COVID. They have seen increased awareness and the need for individuals to be aware when using technology; we are obviously seeing increased rates of scamming, et cetera, so there is a strong uptake that we are seeing in that space. Equally, Council on the Ageing also runs a Midweek Matters initiative, which runs through a series of different themes and topics based on priority areas that older Canberrans have identified that they seek further information on, and IT is a strong theme that comes through that regularly, for presentations.

In addition, the seniors grant program has historically seen applications that have been successfully funded for initiatives that have an ICT focus on supporting that awareness for their members, particularly in some community groups, and traditionally, in culturally and linguistically diverse community groups, we see that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. One the most common issues that gets raised with people who are ageing in our community is around footpaths. They cannot traverse their local footpaths, where they are cracked or incomplete, and they have got a walking frame or a wheelchair, but they are not really successfully engaging with something like Fix My Street. Is any work going on, whether it is advocating on their behalf, being proactive and seeking out where wheelchair access is disconnected, or providing ways for people to have their voices heard when they do not know how to do that through the existing pathways?

Ms Evans: I think that, again, this is one of the areas where the responsibility of Fix My Street does not sit with us, but through looking at the Age-friendly City strategy, it regularly comes up around safety and accessibility. These are areas where, even when we do not have the responsibility for the actual physical infrastructure, the responsibility around that kind of advocacy to the other directorates, or engagement with the other directorates, certainly would come through the Office for Seniors and through that plan.

The way that we develop the plans as whole-of-government plans is we have officials from each of the directorates, and then we are able to look at that area, for instance, of accessibility or safety in the community, or whatever it is, and the relevant directorate would take responsibility for actions in that space. We would continue to advocate around that. It is a very significant issue for people who are older in our community because Canberra is such a spread-out place, and those sorts of things, like pathways, are always going to come up as a need for them.

THE CHAIR: And often, with the under-reporting, someone might have a cracked footpath out the front, and they do not know that they are supposed to report it; they just say, “The government has not showed up, and it has been there for five years,”—that kind of thing.

Ms Evans: Yes.

THE CHAIR: And do they report back to you? When you are engaging with other areas of government on the development of plans, do they report back through these

yearly progress reports?

Ms Evans: Yes, through those senior officials groups, and, then, through the annual report that the minister would give against the strategy, we would outline what has been done in each of those areas.

THE CHAIR: Okay, thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: I am just thinking, for example, of libraries, and staff having the permission to check-in with someone, an older person, who might be struggling with technology, and staff having the bandwidth. Are you able to help them out? Is that the kind of advocacy that you are able to make?

Ms Evans: Yes, certainly, through those senior officials groups, they are the kinds of conversations that do come up regularly.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes.

Miss Evans: I have to say: I cannot speak on behalf of all my colleagues, but I think Libraries ACT is an excellent example of really going the extra mile to provide support. They certainly do an excellent job of making sure that people who come into the library can access technology or have a safe space to sit in a quiet place, or whatever. As officials, we have these conversations all the time around what we could be doing, particularly when it is not necessarily a cost initiative and it is more around a change of practice or a way in which we could approach things. We do have those conversations, and that is why the broader strategies can be really useful to bring those officials together to consider those matters.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MR HANSON: You mentioned earlier that there were eight grant applications that received funding for veterans. I am just wondering how many applications did not get funding, or did they all get funding? And, if it is possible, are you able to provide the ones that did not get funding, perhaps on notice to the committee, so we can have a bit of visibility on what sorts of veterans groups might be missing out?

Ms Conway: Yes.

MR HANSON: Maybe you have got the raw number there?

Ms Conway: I can confirm that for the 2023-24 grant round, there were 12 applications received.

MR HANSON: Yes.

Ms Conway: In terms of the assessment process for that, as Ms Rule said before, there is a grants panel that is established for that assessment.

MR HANSON: Sure.

Ms Conway: And a recommendation from the panel is put forward, based on the grant guidelines, to the delegate, but we would not release details of the non-successful applicants. They would be notified, as part of that process and would be offered to meet or have a discussion with the directorate to receive feedback on their application.

MR HANSON: You are able to provide details of the ones that were successful? Are they in the annual report somewhere?

Ms Conway: They are in the annual report, and they are also listed on the ACT government website.

MR HANSON: Great, okay. I am just wondering if you have got an up-to-date dataset on veterans in the ACT that breaks down how many there are, how many are still serving as opposed to retired, and how many are reserve as opposed to regular? And is there is a breakdown within that of Army, Navy and Airforce? Do you have an up-to-date dataset?

Ms Evans: We are reliant on the census information.

MR HANSON: Right.

Ms Evans: And we, as the ACT government, are not privy to that. Ms Conway may have a little more detail.

Ms Conway: In addition to the census data—and obviously the census data is being used by jurisdictions quite heavily, given it is the first full data picture that we have of veterans in our regions—DVA also provides transition data on, I believe, an annual basis to jurisdictions. That does have a breakdown of rank of individuals that are leaving the service, but the challenge with transition data is that they may be leaving from the ACT. We obviously have a very high defence population here, but that does not mean that veterans and their families remain in the ACT upon transition, so it is a challenge in being able to see where those individuals may move to as part of their transition, and that creates a bit of grey space in the data.

Ms Rule: And, likewise, the other way around.

Ms Conway: Exactly.

Ms Rule: There would be many veterans who would retire in other jurisdictions and may relocate to the ACT.

Ms Conway: And move back.

MR HANSON: A lot still serving are transitioning through the ACT on a posting. Census data would perhaps be quite inaccurate in terms of capturing that.

Ms Conway: It is just a point-in-time measure.

MR HANSON: Yes. That being the case, are you able to provide the committee with the best dataset that you have, given those limitations?

Ms Conway: Yes; we can do that.

MR HANSON: Thanks.

Ms Orr: Mr Hanson, to help the directorate, when you say “the best dataset”, is that specifically going to how many veterans are in the ACT?

MR HANSON: Yes. There is a bold number of how many veterans are in the ACT, but within that is a subset percentage of those still serving. Maybe you have a breakdown in age groups? I do not know what you have.

Ms Orr: The best assessment of the community as opposed to a physical dataset is what you are after?

MR HANSON: A summation. I do not really care if it is an Excel spreadsheet, a Word table or whatever it is. Without being too specific, what is the total number of veterans and how many are serving as opposed to being retired? Within that, do you have age groups? Do you have breakdown by service? Do you have breakdown by gender? I will leave you guys to work out what you have.

Ms Rule: To be clear, we will take on notice giving you the best representation that we have of the demographics of the ACT veterans community.

MR HANSON: You might just have a single number. It might be as good as that. I am just saying that, if you do have better than that, I would be interested.

Ms Evans: We can give that information verbally.

MR HANSON: If you have it at hand, that is fine.

Ms Orr: In place of giving you data for you to do your own analysis, Mr Hanson, I think the directorate is quite keen to give you what they understand of the demographics of the community. They have that at hand.

Ms Conway: As mentioned, we are heavily reliant on the 2021 census data which confirms that there were 22,220 veterans residing in the ACT. That includes those who were currently serving or were formerly serving, including reservists. Women were significantly under-represented in the ACT. Of the 22,220, 20.9 per cent were female. Regarding the breakdown of current versus formerly serving, 64 per cent of the ACT veteran cohort were formerly serving, and that is significantly lower than other jurisdictions. That is where we speak to people moving away, post service, to areas outside of the ACT.

MR HANSON: Thanks very much.

MS TOUGH: When we talked about grants, you mentioned that an expo for veterans and their families was held in 2023-24. Was there another one held in 2024-25? And what was the makeup of that expo? Was it family-friendly? Was it targeted to a specific demographic? What was its purpose?

Ms Orr: The officials are looking up some information for you, Ms Tough. This is something that I have received some feedback on since I came into the portfolio. It is fair to say that the veteran community and their families are very supportive of the expo, but, with it being a newer initiative, it is still being shaped to meet the wants and needs of the community. The couple of expos that we have had have provided some good information for contrasting different approaches—what does and what does not work. We are taking all of that on board and are thinking about how to best roll out the next one.

MS TOUGH: Thanks, Minister.

Ms Conway: The 2024 expo was held in July last year. It was led by the Council on the Ageing ACT. A select procurement process went into that. Obviously there is sensitivity around COTA ACT not being a veteran organisation. The directorate did take that on board in its decision and recommendation to the delegate. There was a requirement for the organisation to partner with two veteran organisations as part of the delivery and planning for it, in addition to working with the Ministerial Advisory Council for Veterans and their Families and RSL LifeCare, as the lead for the Queanbeyan hub. That expo had over 50 stallholders registered, including a range of veteran-specific and non-veteran-specific organisations—that is, community or government organisations. It was very well attended, with over 500 people attending on the day. A range of demographics was represented, including older veterans, family members, people who had recently relocated to the ACT, and those who were not part of veteran family but wanted to come along to see what services were available if they knew someone who may identify.

MS TOUGH: Thank you. I am happy to leave it there in the interest of time.

THE CHAIR: Well done, everyone. Thank you very much for your evidence. 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 would like to thank witnesses who have assisted the committee through their experience and knowledge. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard staff and the secretariat for their support. If a member wishes to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliamentary portal as soon as possible and no later than five business days from today.

The committee adjourned at 1.00 pm.