



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY

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

Members:

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

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 17 NOVEMBER 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

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| Health and Community Services Directorate | 242 |

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 1.00 pm

Appearances:

Berry, Ms Yvette, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation

Education Directorate

Wood, Ms Jo, Director-General

Spence, Ms Angela, Deputy Director-General

Crowther, Mr Michael, Acting Executive Group Manager, System Policy and Reform

Matthews, Mr David, Executive Group Manager, People, Communication and Governance

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2024-25. The committee will today hear from the Minister for Education and Early Childhood and the Minister for Seniors and Veterans.

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 this city and this region. I would also like to acknowledge and welcome any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

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

We welcome Ms Yvette Berry MLA, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, and officials. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. We have also been clarifying that you no longer need to say that you have read and acknowledge the privilege statement; it is taken as given. What a time-saver!

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. I have, of course, as I imagine other members will have, some questions about what has been going on with our schools in the last few days. I for one want to state upfront that I am not in a position to determine whether the right decisions or wrong decisions have been made. I am going to ask questions out of curiosity, seeking information. Sometimes other hearings go different ways where there is a bit of a position being peddled, but I for one do not have one. My first question is: which specific piece of legislation or piece

of the relevant legislation required this course of action to be taken?

Ms Wood: The legislation that governs our response to asbestos in our schools, which is a workplace, is our Work Health and Safety Act, and there are more detailed requirements in the Work Health and Safety Regulations. The key requirements under the Work Health and Safety Regulations is that, where we suspect something is asbestos, we must treat it as asbestos. That is kind of the threshold.

When we have had products that have been identified as potentially containing asbestos, where there has been a recall from a regulator and they have identified that through testing of product, that is a starting point for us to say we, of course, suspect that, if we have the same product in our schools, it contains asbestos, so we must treat it as asbestos. Then we need to work through a risk assessment. We need to understand where we have that product—not just which school it is in, but also where it is in the school, how it is being used in the school and whether it is in a sealed container that has not actually been opened yet that is sitting in a cupboard or in a tray out in a classroom or learning space area.

So we need to understand all of that, and that is something that we have had to do around the different sand products that have been recalled over the last few days. That then informs decisions about whether that product can be safely isolated. If it is a sealed product in a cupboard, can we close the cupboard and make sure that cannot be accessed? Can we close that particular room or learning space? All of our schools have such different layouts, and it is not a one-size-fits-all response to that. We have actually got to understand the spaces. Then we need to engage registered asbestos assessors to come in and advise on what further the action we need to take, what testing is required and what remediation is required. The phase of removal also involves registered removalists.

For us, when we have been through that risk assessment and that assessment of what it looks like in each school, if we have some spaces that contain the product that can be isolated, then we go through with principals all the operational planning around, “If you do not have these spaces available can you operate the school? Can you operate some year levels and not all year levels?” That is the detail we have to step through around what is operationally feasible. If it is a preschool that is impacted and a preschool class that may need to be moved, then there is the regulation under the national law that applies to that as well.

THE CHAIR: So there is the requirement to take all—I think the language that was used—“practicable steps” to remove the risk. Where does that language come from?

Ms Wood: That comes from the Work Health and Safety Regulations.

THE CHAIR: Is that a part of what you were describing in terms of remediation of asbestos risks, or is there is that one part and then there is a separate part that says that, when you identify a risk of some kind, this is the kind of step or these are the kinds of actions that are required?

Ms Wood: There are very specific requirements if the risk is asbestos.

THE CHAIR: This is all in that section?

Ms Wood: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Given that many non-government schools presumably affected by this have not closed, what other options were considered prior to the decision being made first on Thursday regarding the closure of a smaller number of schools on Friday and then yesterday or Saturday in relation to today's closures?

Ms Wood: There is the process I have just described where we have had to understand, "Where is the product in our schools; how is it being used in the schools; which spaces is it in; and can those spaces be isolated so that other spaces can be safely used?" That is kind of the starting assessment that then leads to working out the operational options with each principal about whether, if it is not in the library, a class can move to the library, whether they can use the hall as a learning space and what the range of options are for that particular school environment. It is only when it is not operationally possible to fully operate the school that we have moved to, as you saw on Friday, some partial closures. We moved to partial closures, because we wanted to maximise the extent to which children and young people could be at school. Where it was across the whole school and it was not possible to isolate the product in particular spaces that has led to full closures.

For yesterday, for the further round we needed to do with the Kmart product that was recalled, we started with drawing in the information that principals had already while they were offsite—so, based on the work they had already done, did they know if they had this product or did they know if they had any other sand products that had not been addressed? That was the initial information gathering. What we discovered from that information gathering was that this second product was even more widely used in schools.

Then we needed to do the visual inspection in each school. If the recollection of principals was, "Yes, we do have this product," or, "We know that we have this product," we still needed to activate people, and we have drawn on school-based staff and we have drawn on some SES volunteers to actually go into schools and do the visual inspection, identify where it is and map that so we have a map of where the product is in each school. Because it was a large number of schools on Sunday, that visual inspection process has taken longer. Without the visual inspection we actually cannot make the assessment to say if there are any spaces in the school that can safely operate. That is the work that has continued today, to be able to identify by the end of today which schools as a whole can safely operate and which spaces in schools can be safely operated.

THE CHAIR: So some of the schools that are fully closed may not have needed to be if there were infinite resources and you could have done a visual inspection of all of them? Some of those visual inspections are happening today and we might see partial closures tomorrow.

Ms Wood: Yes. We got through a lot. I do not have that detail with me, because the people that have it are dealing with the issue.

THE CHAIR: They are doing the inspecting.

Ms Berry: Yes. Sorry, I should have said at the beginning of this hearing that we have tried to narrow down the people who are here so that they can get on with dealing with the situation at hand.

Ms Wood: They did get through a lot of the visual inspections yesterday and there was a small amount still to do today.

THE CHAIR: Is there kind of a costing exercise going on to figure out the overall cost, or is this something that is going to have to be done post hoc?

Ms Wood: We know what the costs are in terms of engaging the external contractors. But it is going to depend on the remediation required in each school as to how much that is. We will have to calculate what it has cost once we are through this and we have all of that information.

THE CHAIR: Do you have a per hour cost for the remediation contractors?

Ms Wood: I do not have one with me.

THE CHAIR: Maybe by the end of the hearing. I have a couple more, and I am sure there will be supplementaries. In terms of teachers who are not teaching today, is that annual leave that they are taking for the day off? What are the leave arrangements?

Ms Berry: Mr Matthews will join us for this question.

MR PARTON: Good on him.

Mr Matthews: Thank you for your confidence, Mr Parton. The advice that we have given to staff whose workplaces are not open today is to work from home or another agreed location with their supervisor. That could be a ACT government Flexispace. It could be our headquarters at Hedley Beare Centre for Teaching and Learning. It could be at another school if that was possible. For staff that have caring responsibilities—that is, they need to look after their children today—we have asked them to do that first as their priority. So people are either working or they are on personal leave today, and we will be giving consideration to giving additional leave for the requirements today and for as long as schools remain closed.

THE CHAIR: I have heard reports of at least some teachers who have no annual leave entitlement but obviously have not taken up those remote working opportunities and are concerned about what it means for them today.

Mr Matthews: We would like to reassure our staff that we appreciate, for the whole community but for our workforce as well, that these decisions have had to be made quickly and outside working hours. That has given people relatively little notice to make alternative arrangements. We will be absolutely taking that into account in making sure that people can work flexibly or, if they cannot, that they are covered with their leave requirements.

THE CHAIR: What kind of leave requirements? Would it be that an additional kind of leave would be considered if someone does not have any annual leave available?

Mr Matthews: Yes, that is correct, Mr Emerson. For most teachers their annual leave is part of the stand-down arrangements, but obviously people have got long service leave or personal leave. But the provision that we would be looking at using is in the enterprise agreement. There are leave additional leave requirements, leave otherwise not approved or available, and it is for these sort of extraordinary circumstances. So that will be the leave clause that we will be looking at to address anybody who has been unable to attend their workplace today and does not have an appropriate leave arrangement in place.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to provide an assurance that that would be used where needed?

Mr Matthews: Yes, absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms Berry: I would say, though, that I know teachers are working from home. It is report-writing season. So some teachers without children are taking the chance to work from home and do some of that work.

MR PARTON: I want to get to the crux of Mr Emerson's first question regarding the workplace occupational health and safety framework. Minister in your public statements on this, you have stated that our workplace occupational health and safety framework is more stringent than every other jurisdiction. Your assertion has pretty much been that, once you had the information that you received about these products, it was almost mandatory, based on our workplace occupational health and safety framework, that schools would have to be closed.

I think what Mr Emerson was asking in his initial question was: what is specifically different about our workplace occupational health and safety framework which has led us to this position with regard to closing the schools? What is specifically different between our framework and every other framework in the country involving every other school network, including ones in our city, which has not led them to the same conclusion? That is the crux of what I am trying to find out. Who can offer something in response to that?

Ms Wood: Mr Parton, I can talk about some key differences between work health and safety regulations for the ACT and some other jurisdictions—for example, New South Wales. What I understand is that our work health and safety laws and regulation are based on the model laws but, in the way they have been implemented in each jurisdiction, there can be some small changes. One of the key requirements for our work health and safety regulations is that for assessment of asbestos and any kind of handling or work involving asbestos we need to engage a registered asbestos assessor and contractor. Some other jurisdictions have a definition of a “competent person” for that type of work, which often would be registered asbestos assessor but there might be circumstances in which they can do it differently. So one of the key things for us is we need for each of the schools—for every school—to have brought in the asbestos

assessors to do that work on assessment of what is required for remediation and how that school or part of that school can operate safely

MR PARTON: Right.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: The legislation and the regulation referred to the PCBU obligations as being, “To ensure that the workplace has eliminated risk or is as safe as far as reasonably practical.” So kind of eliminated the risk. So it is the second part of that regulation. What advice was received or you have to inform you that the course of action you have undertaken meets the definition of “as far as reasonably practical”?

Ms Wood: We have a governance structure on work health and safety for the directorate which helps us work through how we apply our work health and safety regulations throughout the Education Directorate and our public schools. We have a range of ways that we ensure our assurance and compliance with all of our obligations. We have internally a small work health and safety team, and they have a lot of expertise on the act and the regulations.

We obviously consult WorkSafe. They are not in a position to advise us on what specific action we need to take. They could not, for example, advise us whether a school needs to be closed for safety. But what they can advise us on is what our obligations are. We have drawn on that advice from WorkSafe about our obligations to inform our risk assessment. That has then informed our operational decisions about which schools can continue to operate safely as a whole; which schools can operate safely with full operations but with some spaces within the schools isolated; which schools can operate safely in part—so they are the partial closures; and which schools, because of the risk assessment and the inability to isolate the product, would need to be fully closed.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: And, presumably, each school is a separate workplace—you have a blanket set of obligations and regulations but each school operates as a separate workplace?

Ms Wood: We have, as a PCBU, obligations for all of our spaces and sites. Because this is about a physical kind of risk in the workplace, we need to assess the context of that particular space. So, across the school, we are looking at the impacts not just at the school site as a whole but also in each building within the school and the impacts within each space within the school. Some schools are very traditional, with kind of closed-in classrooms with corridors, and some of our school spaces are quite open plan. There is a range of different designs. That then impacts how you can manage the risk of that sand product in the different spaces.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Thanks.

MR HANSON: Was the decision to close 69 schools rather than have partial closures made at the directorate level or was that an independent decision made by each school?

Ms Wood: That is at the directorate level. I am the decision-maker for when we have closed schools, which schools can be closed, which schools could be reopened, as having the ultimate delegation for the PCBU under our work health and safety obligations.

MR HANSON: If the mapping has been done—or predominantly—was there not the ability to say, “These are the areas that we need to isolate within the schools?” so you could then still have kept the schools open? I accept that it would have been then a management within each of those schools. But, rather than very late notice to parents, you could have then kept the schools open, isolate those particular areas and allow the kids to come in. Perhaps they would have to be taught in the gym but they were at least being looked after and not imposing that significant inconvenience on parents. Was that not possible?

Ms Wood: It is a balance. I spoke about the time to do those visual assessments—which, as I said, were going into last night. We had the SS volunteers supporting us until about 8 o’clock last night to bring together that map. That did not get to every single school. So there were still some that needed that visual assessment this morning. Once you have got that map, then we need to have the detailed conversations with the principal, which are quite complex, about which spaces can be isolated, which classes use those spaces and how those classes could be organised differently. There is a lot of detail work that has to happen with the principal on that. We were not in a position to make those decisions by a reasonable time last night. So it is getting the balance between giving people notice that school will be closed and giving people time, where possible, to make other arrangements.

We acknowledge that, although we were able to make the overarching announcement at around 5 o’clock last night, our processes for communicating individually to families took much longer than we would have liked and intended. That is something we are definitely working on now to streamline for our extra communication.

MR HANSON: So, moving forward then, when do you think you are going to be in a position to be able to advise which schools are either going to be open completely or partially open so that parents are advised? Have they have been informed yet? Where are they at?

Ms Wood: We are doing the work now on taking the mapping exercise that has been done to look at what is possible for tomorrow. We also have assessors out in schools and doing the work, particularly prioritising our specialist schools. There is a whole range of work happening to clear the risk in schools but also to do that work on which schools can be open and which spaces can be used, which might lead to some schools partially opening. We will have a point this afternoon where we will have to make decisions about the schools as we can open for tomorrow, so that we can get that communication out.

Ms Berry: I would just go quickly, if you do not mind, Chair, to the visual inspections. That is actually people walking through school hallways, opening doors and checking in classes to see whether there are any of these sand products around the place. That takes some time to do. I absolutely understand that people have been saying things like, “Shouldn’t schools already know?” and all of that kind of commentary. They do not know where every single piece of their toolkit is across the schools. That is why it required that visual inspection—and also on the type of sand, because the national conversation on this evolved over the weekend. In fact, we had initially opened Woden School, which is one of our specialist schools, based on feedback that the school did

not contain the sand. Unfortunately, upon arrival at the school today, teachers found that there was actually sand in the school, and the families have been notified and students are going back home.

MS BARRY: I know that the decisions in this space are evolving, and I appreciate the effort that has been put in. You have talked about what supports are available for teachers. What supports, if any, have you put in place for parents?

Ms Berry: If parents are in the public service, they can obviously access EAP programs. We have the hotline set up, although very low numbers, like a handful of people, are contacting the hotline. So we can probably put that up again just to make sure that people know that that is available.

Ms Wood: We are also ensuring our communications out to families point to any community supports that are available for people who are concerned. We are also pointing people to the national health advice, which emphasises the low risk. We keep ensuring that that information is included when we are communicating to parents.

MS BARRY: Do you have anything in place if, for example, a parent cannot get daycare or care arrangements? Do you have anything in place for that?

Ms Berry: No; this is just a situation that has arisen and our focus is on making sure that our schools are safe for students and families. I understand this is very complicated and very disruptive to families in our community. We are hoping it will be for a short period. On Friday, it was going to be an even shorter period and then, of course, we got the additional information. Now we are in a more impactful situation, but I am very hopeful that we will resolve this.

I would also say that the situation and how our community and the country responds to it are also evolving. Early childhood education and care settings are also impacted by this, and how they are responding will vary as well depending on their usage of the sand. It is just one of those situations where it is almost like out of the frying pan and into the fire in some cases. We could not support families to go somewhere else, because there is nowhere else. We are not able to support them in our schools. So there is nowhere really that we could have done administratively, even if it were possible.

MS BARRY: I have been receiving text messages, and parents just want to understand the relationship between Kmart and the education department.

Ms Berry: There is no relationship; it is just where the sand is.

MS BARRY: Right, okay; so there is no relationship. It is not like you are buying sand from Kmart, for example, because I think one of the headlines—

Ms Wood: Kmart may have been the source of some products in schools. Ms Spence can speak to how schools source those kinds of products?

Ms Spence: Schools are provided with funding to make decisions around how they resource their school. They have to meet their procurement obligations, of course. Based on the needs of their students, there are multiple suppliers that they may go to

for products. Kmart may have been one of those suppliers that they use to resource those products in the schools. It is no different to our Officeworks supplier. They often use Officeworks for many different resources. But there may have been other suppliers that schools would use. I think the MTA products that were identified as part of this first process is a supplier of school educational resources. Schools make those decisions based on the needs of their particular school. But there is no formal arrangement in place with Kmart to provide, at a directorate level, resources; it is a school-based decision.

THE CHAIR: I want to jump back to communication with affected families. Ms Wood, you indicated that perhaps that would be streamlined. This is one of the things I was curious about. Minister, you committed to updating families by yesterday afternoon, which I think you did, but then for families to then get an email from the school principal, with several who might have got them at 7 pm, 8 pm and 9 pm last night. Are there plans to address that?

Ms Berry: Absolutely. Ms Wood will go through what happened.

Ms Wood: Obviously, because this work was happening over a weekend, we had less capacity to activate some of the normal mechanisms schools would use to communicate with families, and we centralised the approach to that communications using our system to get it out. We used the website as the primary source for the whole community. But then for the text messages out to families and the specific emails to families, we did that through a centralised process.

There was a bit of complexity because we were trying to communicate in a way that was quite tailored to each school. Schools had a range of statuses on Friday—they were closed, open and partially closed—and we were trying to explain to them what the difference was for Monday. There were a number of different communications that had to be sent to the right school. I think we had some limitations with the speed with which that central system could actually get those communications out.

Today, when we communicate it for tomorrow, we are looking to be more streamlined in how we communicate—using the central website as the source of information so that we can get simpler messages out more quickly—but also looking at how, given that schools are operating today, we can use some of their usual mechanisms as well, so that we can supply the kind of key messages and they can get them out through those channels, which may happen more quickly.

Ms Berry: Normally this kind of communication would go out to schools in batches. We tried to centralise it and the system overloaded a little bit.

Ms Wood: It was a bit slow, yes.

Ms Berry: It slowed it right down. So we are changing the approach this afternoon—because schools are operational—to text messaging initially and then getting emails out, with, of course, the website being the central point of truth on all of this.

THE CHAIR: I think this goes back to Mr Hanson's earlier question: when should families expect those messages, today and tomorrow and any other day?

Ms Berry: What did we say—about five?

Ms Wood: Yes, we are aiming for around five for the announcement to community and then specific messages to families from that.

Ms Berry: Our intention last night was to do it all simultaneously, but the system could not handle it.

THE CHAIR: So to community and then to affected families? I am just trying to understand the difference.

Ms Wood: Yes, for community to have the notification on the website that we can then share in a range of ways.

THE CHAIR: A press conference, a media statement or whatever?

Ms Wood: Yes.

THE CHAIR: So that goes at five and then you are hoping the next message goes at 5.30 or—

Ms Wood: We would do them as quickly as possible after five.

THE CHAIR: I am just asking as I am sure every member is getting questioned.

Ms Berry: Yes, and that was a lesson learnt for us last night that, with centralising thousands of emails, the system could not manage it. Well, it could manage it, but just in a slow way.

THE CHAIR: We got them. They came in at half past six. They were quite helpful.

Ms Berry: Okay.

MR HANSON: Beyond the sort of when your school is going to open or not, what medical advice is being provided to staff and parents so they can understand? I understand you have said it is low risk, but is there testing available? If someone is “impacted”, what does that mean? Is that medical advice or a link to a source or something being provided?

Ms Wood: Yes; a link to a source. We are linked to the national health advice that has been developed through chief health officers or the asbestos experts. The specific advice is that no clinical assessment is recommended for anyone who has had contact with the product. That is the health advice.

Ms Berry: It is online. That did not come out till Saturday, which was a bit annoying—but, anyway.

MR HANSON: Has that information been forwarded to parents and to staff

Ms Berry: It is available, I think, on the website.

Ms Wood: Yes. It has been included in all—

MR HANSON: Sometimes people do not trawl through websites. Is it sort of like, “If you have enquiries about medical, this is it”?

Ms Spence: Certainly the link to the specific information from the Environmental Health Standing Committee for the Australian Health Protection Committee—so the national advice—is included through the communications that were received last night in the email. They are included on the website as part of that communications as well. They are not on the SMS messaging, as it is condensed to a certain amount of characters. But it has been embedded as part of the multiple streams of communication so that parents can have access to that information.

It is interim advice. We are expecting to receive updated advice as this progresses nationally over the course of the coming week. But, just so that we are clear, the preliminary assessment—this is direct—indicates that there is a low risk to human health for these products. Based on the current available information, we do not recommend any clinical assessment for those who may have been in contact with these products.

MR PARTON: I, as you know, Minister, did whatever I could to communicate to as many Canberrans as possible.

Ms Berry: Well, you do have the highest following; so I appreciate it.

MR PARTON: I try.

Ms Berry: Thank you, Mark.

MR PARTON: I certainly appreciate that this was a very fluid situation and I appreciate also that it has caused distress to a lot of people, including people in this room. So I get that. I, however, find it difficult to subscribe, Minister, to your assertion that, based on our workplace health and safety framework, ultimately, once this information became available regarding these products that it was virtually an automatic “We had no option other than to close schools.”

My assessment is that there was a level of discretion that was applied to the framework when measuring it against the information that came to us regarding these products. What I am trying to get my head around is: who has exercised that discretion and in what way? Ms Wood, respectfully, you stated in this hearing that you were, “the decision-maker”. Surely, Minister, you are the decision-maker. Surely you are the one who is flying the plane. Is Ms Wood the decision-maker or are you the decision-maker?

Ms Berry: Under the legislation, PCBU is the Director-General, Jo Wood. I am the minister, and, yes, of course I have some responsibility there. I am not just saying, “It is all Jo and blame her for anything that we do.” But, under the legislation, the decision on the closure of schools sits with the Director-General.

MR PARTON: Obviously there was a conversation that happened between the two of you at some point when Ms Wood suggested to you that this is the course of action that “I, as the PCBU, want to go down.” Did you just agree completely with that or was there pushback? How did that conversation play out?

Ms Berry: The ACCC information came out on Wednesday and I was on to my office saying, “What are we going to do here? This is a national kind of notification. I think we are probably going to have to do something.” At that point in time, I did not have enough information to know what that was and neither did the directorate. The first thing that the directorate did was do that assessment across all our schools, asked our schools to fill in a survey basically on what sand products were in there or whether they have the Officeworks Kadink sand product.

That survey did not come back until Thursday afternoon, where I think we got most of the information back from the schools back—or nearly every one of the schools. It was across that afternoon and late that evening when the directorate, Ms Wood and I and some other government staff members as well as the Work Health and Safety Commissioner got together to talk about this nationally evolving situation. Her advice to us was about what we needed to do under the act, which was as reasonably practicable we needed to remove the risk. It was after we had gathered all the information, understood that we had the sand in the school and that it was a risk and it was evolving, that we made the decision to close the schools on Friday. That was late Thursday night.

Ms Wood: Yes, Thursday night.

Ms Berry: Around 9.30?

Ms Wood: We advised a course of action that, based on our risk assessment, we would need to take.

MR PARTON: Did it at any point strike you as being a little odd that every other jurisdiction faced the same set of circumstances but reacted in a different way? Did you raise at any point that we are outliers here?

Ms Berry: Yes, and we discussed that at length. It was handy to get the advice from the commissioner on our responsibilities under the act. Our act is rigorous. It is one of the strongest in the country. I had noted, as we all had, that nobody else was doing anything, which I thought was unusual until I understood the implications under our legislation better and the requirements for the Director-General and the government as far as making sure that our work health and safety requirements were being followed.

I did note, and have noted since the situation has evolved, that there are schools closing around the place and people are taking different action across different states and territories. New Zealand was the first place to actually start taking any kind of action following the initial first ACCC notification. So, yes, we did talk about this at length. Obviously, our first decision was not “Let’s just close the schools and we will figure out this later.” It was: “We understand our obligations under the legislation is to do this work”

MR HANSON: Can I quickly jump in to clarify something? You have explained your

different response because our legislation is different to that in other jurisdictions. But, within the ACT, are the Catholic and independent schools subject to the same work health and safety legislation as public schools?

Ms Berry: Yes.

MR HANSON: So that does not explain the difference between other jurisdictions. You have explained the different laws. You have the same laws and the same issue with the non-government schools but a very different response. That seems a bit incongruous.

Ms Wood: Obviously, each PCBU has to make its own risk assessments and its own decisions. We do not know in any detail what other schools have done. We have shared our approach and the way that we are working. We have been in contact with the non-government school sector since Thursday night and been really happy to share whatever we are doing. They have to make their own assessments on their own context. We have no knowledge of a whole lot of the detail that you would need to come to any assessment of the approach they have taken. We do not know how much of the product they used. The context in their individual schools is something they really have to assess and, other than sharing, collaborating and supporting other sectors, we do not have a role in that.

Ms Berry: I have not been in contact with the non-government school sector personally, but I heard the independent school CEO this morning say on the radio that 11 of their 16 schools, I think it is, are operating with some changed class arrangements.

MR HANSON: But not closed?

Ms Berry: But not closed at this stage.

MR HANSON: But it is the same risk and it is the same laws and then, on the one hand, you are saying you had no option but to close; whereas you have got other bodies saying that there are options not to close. So there is this sort of dislink between what you are saying and the application of the law and these other organisations who are saying that, under exactly the same laws with, presumably, very similar scenarios, there is an option.

Ms Berry: Again, that would depend on the risk assessments that they carry out and on their application of the legislation. That would be something that the Work Health and Safety Commissioner would need to, I guess, debate who is applying the law appropriately.

MR HANSON: But, surely, if there was a problem, the Work Health and Safety Commissioner would have gone in and closed those schools. That is what you have intimated, as I have heard on the radio, that you had to do, because otherwise they would have shut the schools. But the Catholic and independent schools are still open. They have not been shut by anyone.

Ms Wood: Again, it is an individual risk assessment and individual decisions that each school have to make. We did not start from the position that there was no option but to close schools. We started by understanding our context, understanding how much product, understanding how it had been used, where it was used, risk assessing whether that could be contained and isolated to identify what spaces are available in a school to

operate and then what the operational impacts of that are. Closing a school is about it being operationally unable to operate because too many of the spaces would have to be closed. Each non-government school would also have to make those same kinds of assessments.

MR PARTON: Just to close off on that line of questioning for me, I had a conversation with the WorkSafe commissioner on Friday, and she certainly made it clear that, in regard to those closures on Friday, as has been stated at this hearing and in other public places, she was not the one who made any ruling about this.

Ms Berry: That is right.

MR PARTON: But, Minister, on ABC Radio this morning—and Mr Hanson has just referred to it—you suggested that the decision was made, apparently by Ms Wood but backed by you as minister, that the schools had to be closed and you said that, if indeed you had not made that decision, that the WorkSafe commissioner would probably have closed the schools at some point. Was that correct or was that incorrect? Was that a true statement? I am not saying that you were lying; I am just saying it was a very fluid situation.

Ms Berry: Not much—you are not really saying I am lying, but kind of.

MR PARTON: No, I am not saying that at all. I just know that things happened in a hurry, and I just want a clarification as to whether that statement was actually correct.

Ms Berry: That is a real possibility. Had we not done the work that we did to identify the risk and had not done what we are required to do in isolating and remediating the risk, using a licensed assessor and contractor and then having a certificate of clearance from them to go back into the school, there is a real possibility that the Work Health and Safety Commissioner could have. Again, this would have required an investigation by them to inspect all of our schools to see that all of our schools have acted appropriately in these circumstances.

MR PARTON: So would you expect the Work Health and Safety Commissioner to take action to close Catholic and independent schools in the ACT on the basis of that position?

Ms Berry: I would not foreshadow any decisions that the commissioner makes. Those are her decisions to make, not mine.

MR PARTON: You kind of have foreshadowed them. You said if we did not close, it is highly—

Ms Berry: No—

MR PARTON: You basically suggested—

Ms Berry: No; we are responding and applying the legislation appropriately. What you are suggesting, Mr Parton, is that I break the law, and I am not going to break the law. In these circumstances, I believe that, having the most stringent and robust work health

and safety legislation in the country is something we should be proud of. My job was to make sure that we were eliminating the risk and applying the legislation appropriately—and, frankly, that is best practice.

MR PARTON: Does the inflexibility of this act, as displayed by this circumstance which has rolled out in the last four days, potentially lead us to examine what changes need to be made in that space or not?

Ms Berry: To make workplaces less safe?

MR PARTON: That is not what I am saying at all. That is not what I am saying.

Ms Berry: Is that not what you are saying?

MR PARTON: We are dealing with a situation which we have dealt with radically differently than every other jurisdiction. So I am just asking the question: is the inflexibility of that act, based on our response to this situation, worth examining?

Ms Berry: That would be a decision for others to make. But, in the work that we have been doing, I think we have to be clear that, even if it is a low risk, the risk is still there, and the balance that we need to make within our schools is: do we want to be the ones that put people at risk, even at a low risk, or do we want to be the ones that inconvenience people and disrupt people's lives for a moment while we manage this situation that is evolving nationally?

I hope that it does not get worse. I hope that the news that comes out through the testing across the country and our own testing in the ACT confirms that the risk remains low. But I want to be satisfied within myself that that is what we are taking into account—that, regardless of the level of the risk, our responsibility is to make sure people are safe and that children are safe in our schools.

MR PARTON: I appreciate the response. Thank you.

Ms Berry: Thanks, Mr Parton.

MISS NUTTALL: My question is about priority enrolment areas. We have previously been assured that out-of-area enrolment policies for 2026 onwards would ensure that applications made on the grounds of student wellbeing would be given increased consideration. It looks like that policy has allowed for 34 of the 41 applications for out-of-area enrolment to Melrose High on wellbeing grounds to be rejected, as recent FOI documents have shown. So that is 34 out of 41 applications on wellbeing grounds rejected. Why might that have been the case?

Ms Wood: Miss Nuttall, we have had a different approach to out-of-area enrolments on wellbeing grounds this year through a centralised process to achieve a greater consistency, because that has been one of the issues that people have raised in the past about the consistency of individual school level decision-making. That enables us to really apply a consistent approach and work really well with schools on that approach as well. Mr Crowther can speak to how that pilot has progressed. We did have a very large number of wellbeing enrolment applications and there was, within that large

number, a large number that did not meet the criteria. But Mr Crowther can speak to that.

Mr Crowther: In terms of the particular numbers that you quoted there, Miss Nuttall, I do not have the actual numbers; but, in terms of the process, as Ms Wood pointed out, we received well over a thousand out-of-area applications to attend a public school that was not a family or child's priority enrolment area school. This year we have set up a centralised process to assess applications and make recommendations to school principals. Where the enrolment applications raise matters around students with disability or particular complex needs, we leverage our subject matter experts within the directorate—our clinical supports, our targeted support areas—to assess the information available.

The team provides a recommendation to the relevant school principal. In some cases, the school principal would know more about the family than the directorate does, or it is evidenced by the information provided by the families in the applications. In those cases, the principals are encouraged to reach out, if they believe the recommendation is not in the best interests of the child, because they know things that we do not. On the information that is provided, the principal will either accept or not accept an enrolment. The judgment is about whether or not the young person's needs can be met through their priority enrolment area school.

In the event that the application is not accepted, families can request a review of that decision, and they can provide additional information to the directorate. We undertake the same process, where these are assessed internally, and we leverage our specialist supports that are available in the directorate; another recommendation is made to the principal, and they will then make their decision to accept or not accept the review.

In the event that the review is not accepted, families can appeal that decision. An appeal has a panel comprising a school principal—not the principal involved in any of the original decisions or the local area school—one of our education executive leads, and our specialist people within the directorate, as part of the panel. That panel will make a recommendation as to whether or not the out-of-area enrolment should be accepted.

It is a very complex space. There is a lot of effort put in to try to make appropriate recommendations to the principals. We also have those safeguards and, if things are not correct, there are opportunities for families to seek a review and then appeal those decisions.

MISS NUTTALL: You said that over a thousand applications were received; was that specifically on wellbeing criteria?

Mr Crowther: Yes, that was between enrolments opening and, I believe, the end of June or July, with what we call our bulk round; then we have received some additional ones, as people have sought enrolment after that bulk-round period.

MISS NUTTALL: Does this track higher than previous years? This might need to be taken on notice: would you be able to provide, say, a breakdown of how many applications were received each year over the last five years?

Mr Crowther: Unfortunately, not with the way that the data was collected in previous years. The out-of-area enrolments were just grouped into an out-of-area enrolment. This is the first year that we have differentiated between applications on wellbeing grounds, curriculum, siblings or legal reasons. We would like to; unfortunately, the data prior to this year does not support that.

MISS NUTTALL: Of that thousand, how many were rejected? Was there an average rejection rate per target school?

Mr Crowther: With those target schools, I would have to take that information on notice. We would need to consider whether there was a review and the outcome of that, any appeals, or whether the application was subsequently withdrawn. I will take on notice what information we can provide around a breakdown.

MISS NUTTALL: That would be great; thank you very much. Returning to the original point of the question, I do not think I heard it in your original answer. At Melrose high, that policy that we have that we would try to prioritise out-of-area enrolments on wellbeing grounds at Melrose high allowed for 34 of the 41 applications rejected. I am interested in how that stacks up. I know there is a mind to make sure that we are able to enable students; at the same time, more than two-thirds have been rejected.

Ms Wood: We can take on notice the data, as Mr Crowther said. I understand, from the work and the assessments that were done, that people often identify wellbeing grounds when actually their application may be under a different category, like curriculum. It is about assessing whether they actually meet wellbeing criteria.

MISS NUTTALL: Certainly, you will hear from students who might want to move schools because they are experiencing bullying, or they feel that the school they are at is not meeting their needs. Do you agree that different ACT public schools have differing abilities to accommodate different needs among student cohorts?

Ms Wood: Schools are complex places. They are dynamic places as well. The student cohort changes, the staff cohort changes, things are working well for a young person in a school and maybe then they are working less well. We do everything we can to support young people in the school that they are at. There are some circumstances where it becomes a better option for the young person to have an opportunity at a different school. That is something that we are conscious of, particularly in the wellbeing enrolments.

That is why we have taken the step of bringing the wellbeing enrolments into the centre, so we can have that visibility across all those requests. The new data is really important because it will actually give us data on what are the wellbeing issues that young people are experiencing that are leading to this, and not only how well we are able to support them in their existing school but also the other things that we need to have in place.

Ms Berry: Part of that work is making sure that, by centralising it a little bit more, we are perhaps having a little bit more flexibility, in humanising the approach. It is not something that can be made easily, without an individual schooling context, because it does have an impact on the school. If you have, in your enrolments, two classes already, and you add an extra student, which means you need to have a third class, otherwise you will be over, those things need to be considered as well, in the context of making

these decisions. But that is not the thing that would necessarily stop a decision on wellbeing grounds, if the young person was eligible, we could support them, and it would be better for them to be in a different school than their own priority enrolment area school.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, I am grateful for information you have provided to us previously. We have heard that some parents have had trouble accessing or essentially uploading supporting documentation when they are making applications for an out-of-area enrolment—for example, a psychologist’s letter of support and things like that. Have you been doing any work with government services?

Mr Crowther: Our online enrolment form is managed through Access Canberra. If there has not been the capability for that form to accommodate the upload of documents, for the process this year, in the online enrolment form we have provided advice, where families provide their information to support the out-of-area enrolment, asking that they email those documents to the directorate so that they can be considered. From the text that families have provided, if it was clear that there was a document that should have been attached and it was not, the team did try to follow up with those families to seek that information.

We are working with Access Canberra to enable the online enrolment form to accept direct uploads. I cannot say at this point whether that is something that will happen for next year, but we are working very closely with them to enable that. If not, if there are other mechanisms to support families to provide those documents, we will make those available.

MISS NUTTALL: What are the main barriers to families attempting to facilitate their child moving to a school that better accommodates their needs?

Ms Wood: I am not quite sure, Miss Nuttall, what the question is. There might be a perception that people have barriers. I am not quite sure what question you are asking of us. We can speak to what issues people raise in their wellbeing application, and what types of things cause them to seek that option.

MISS NUTTALL: Obviously, we see some pretty high rejection rates for places like Melrose. As a category B school, we might not always expect to see such high rejection rates. I am wondering what the barriers are, whether it is schools like Melrose or more broadly, which mean that people do not get their applications supported.

Ms Berry: You need to be careful around the data and using the language of a rejection rate, because there is a lot of work that goes into understanding the applications and why they are being rejected. It might not be on wellbeing grounds; families want to do different things. They might want to enrol in Melrose because they like the soccer fields; I do not know. That could be one of the reasons, but they might put on their form that they want to move there on wellbeing grounds, because their child likes to play football, but their priority enrolment area might have a perfectly good space for football.

Those are the kinds of things that would be considered, and that can be appealed. It is not a cut-and-dried process. It is very individual, for every single individual that goes through the process, and even more so if the process is appealed. Obviously, I am not

part of that decision-making.

Mr Crowther: As the minister said, it is individualised to the family and the school involved. In terms of category B, Melrose being a category B school, category B schools do have some capacity to accept out-of-area enrolments because they have more capacity in the school. However, the criteria are in terms of the individual families for that school, so it is not the case that category B schools have a licence to fill up to the brim.

MISS NUTTALL: Automatically, yes.

Mr Crowther: We are applying the same standard of consideration for the individual applications coming from families. There is a capacity question; if families wish to go to a category A school but a school is category B, it does not change the consideration about whether or not—there is a process.

MISS NUTTALL: With respect to the minister's earlier point, you mentioned the example of someone who might want to go there because of the soccer fields, but I am also—

Ms Berry: That is a very general example. I do not even know whether that is true. I was very much making that one up.

MISS NUTTALL: What I am looking for is the differentiation, because there will also be students in that mix who, for example, were being bullied at the school that they were previously at; or, despite the excellent work of inclusion coaches, their needs were not being met, if they were neurodivergent. It is a matter of understanding that detail. I am happy to leave it there for the time being.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: I have a couple of questions about the flexible scheduling policies at certain schools. I want to make it clear that this is very much from my own conversations within Brindabella. With the decisions around flexible scheduling, I am talking about Friday afternoons—it seems to be, mostly—when students are offered the opportunity to travel home or work within the library. There are not classes, as it were. Are these decisions made at the individual school level? If the answer is yes, is there an overarching directorate policy approach to how and why, and what factors would influence those decisions?

Ms Berry: Mr Matthews would be able to provide a little bit more detail. I think it is a combination of things. Yes, the circumstances at an individual school might have led to a decision for a flexible approach to education. In that initial decision-making, it is a bit of a pilot, and it is about working with the school community on what that looks like going forward. Mr Matthews, do you want to provide some detail about that?

Mr Matthews: Yes, very briefly. There is a fair bit of consistency across schools about their timetabling arrangements, but they are determined locally. Obviously, each school has to deliver the Australian curriculum or the requirements of the Board of Senior Secondary Studies, depending on what sector they are in. But exactly how they do that, how they construct their timetable, whether classes are an hour, an hour and 15 minutes, or 45 minutes, are very much decisions that are made at the local level by principals, in

consultation with families and school communities.

There is no doubt that, in the context of the teacher shortage that we have experienced over the past few years, schools have wanted to get creative about how best to use their teaching resources, and to make sure that there is the opportunity to do that direct instruction, as well as provide other opportunities for students to do more self-directed learning.

In summary, Mr Werner-Gibbings, basically, it is a school-based decision, within some broad parameters that have been set. All schools are funded according to our student resource allocation model. I appreciate that you are referring to a small number of schools in your electorate that have made specific decisions, a little while ago now, to respond to a range of factors associated with student needs and circumstances, and how best to deliver the Australian curriculum.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: This might be a response in the form of a phrase I have heard in previous committees—anecdotal. It is what you are hearing, and it might not be measured. People’s experiences have been really divergent regarding appreciation for flexible learning. Some families think it is tremendous; other families are less enthusiastic. Some kids are very happy with it, particularly the ones who are not doing the work, necessarily, in the afternoons. What is the nature of the feedback that the directorate is getting from families, teachers and perhaps school administrations about the utility of flexible scheduling or the impact, worthwhile or not?

Ms Spence: Some initial reviews conducted across some of those sites is indicating that we are seeing reduced incidents of behaviour. Again, remember that the reasons for schools doing this is that they are trying to maximise core teaching time, and it is about the unavailability of casual relief teachers, in order to be able to cover all the classes necessary throughout the week. As part of some of the review processes, of course, consultation is required with school communities, as part of that decision-making process.

The initial feedback is indicating that we are seeing increased engagement in the lessons that are having the appropriate instruction during the scheduled time, and reduced behavioural incidents when we are having to make decisions to split classes or to move to different levels of supervision during those periods of time. Those are the initial indications. More fulsome reviews have not been conducted across all the schools to look at the trends because it is very targeted to the individual school and the decisions that they make.

Currently, we have four schools that are enacting this particular strategy that is endorsed through a staffing availability matrix. Currently, those schools are Calwell High School, Lanyon High School, Wanniasa School, and Caroline Chisholm School.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Has it been treated as a trial? If so, for how long?

Ms Spence: The initial trial was at Calwell High School, and it has been adopting this strategy since term 3 in 2023. That is probably where most of the data has been collected around the impact on the operations of that particular school and their ability to do quality instruction during the times that have been adjusted in that schedule. That

information was shared and, as other schools have experienced similar challenges with staffing availability, they have consulted with all their stakeholders and worked with Education Directorate staff in our school operations team to go through the process of enacting that strategy.

They are required to review the effectiveness of that, and what they are seeing from their data and their staffing availability, as part of that process. If they can adjust back to their different timetabling structure, they can transition back to the original structure that they had in place. However, we do note that our schools are still facing challenges associated with getting casual teachers in some of our schools. Certainly, that is why those schools are enacting that strategy.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: With the effectiveness reviews or the effectiveness results, are they the fulsome reviews that you were talking about that we are waiting for? Will that information go to the directorate, so that we can ask about it in six or seven months time? Is that the idea?

Ms Spence: Yes, it is absolutely being conducted by the directorate, as the schools are enacting that in their different site settings.

MISS NUTTALL: The ACT government has reassured us of the fact that we have managed to get schools fully staffed, which is great. Would we still be fully staffed if we were not relying on flexible scheduling at Calwell, Lanyon, Wanniasa and Caroline Chisholm?

Ms Berry: Our schools are fully staffed. It is the casual replacement staff more than anything that is causing the challenges with unplanned leave—more so than we have ever had before. That is the main challenge, in addition to finding relief and casual teachers. That is the challenge, because more people are taking time off, as they should, when they are sick, for longer periods. It is unpredictable, and we do not have a pool of casual and relief staff to be able to apply that.

For these particular schools—and some other schools, but these in particular—for a variety of reasons, there was a regular occurrence of having to split classes et cetera, and that was disruptive for everyone. It was not working. This seems to be working, from all the reports back, and the review will tell us about that in time. It is not that schools are not staffed; it is that our schools are different now, and we are responding to that.

MISS NUTTALL: I am interested because often, when people start to take more unplanned leave for longer periods of time—obviously, there are the impacts of COVID—you also tend to see it when, for example, you are understaffed and you are stretching to cover the gaps; essentially, you burn out quicker and, as people burn out, there are less people to replace them. Is this the kind of thing that you have looked into recently? Have you looked into it as part of the workforce task force?

Mr Matthews: Firstly, we get feedback from the principals around what their teaching and recruitment requirements are and, when they give us a position, we are filling that position. In terms of unplanned leave, we do monitor that on a monthly and a quarterly basis and look at schools with higher levels of unplanned leave than others. There is a

whole confluence of factors that result in that, including that many of our workforce have caring responsibilities, of course, as is evident today.

I want to assure you, Miss Nuttall, and the committee that it is something on which we have strong eyes. We want to make sure that every child in every school receives a high-quality education and gets access to those excellent professionals in order to pursue their own interests and dreams. All schools matter and all students matter. In particular, the schools that have been mentioned today are ones that we are actively monitoring and looking to see what we can do to make sure that we are meeting all their staffing requirements, including assisting them with getting casual staff.

MISS NUTTALL: Why is it specifically the nexus of these four schools in Tuggeranong? Do we know why it is those four schools, particularly? Why isn't it something that we are seeing more broadly?

Mr Matthews: There would be a range of data points with that, Miss Nuttall. Forgive me for saying data points; obviously, we are talking about communities, we are talking about families and students, and what is going on. On the workforce side, there are some parts of Canberra and particular schools that are harder to staff than others. That is because, of course, teachers get choices around where they want to work. Of course, they often want to work in close proximity to where they are living or where their own kids are attending school.

Part of it is around some schools having more difficulty than others in attracting relief staff. On the other side of it, some schools have different behavioural challenges that they are facing or different student needs profiles that they are seeking to address. Often it is when these two things come together that schools experience particular challenges. The directorate monitors those data points that I was talking about earlier and makes sure that we are being very proactive in the way that we are engaging with those principals, and with the boards, as required, and to do whatever we can to support every individual school.

MISS NUTTALL: How does that look like in those four schools?

Mr Matthews: My colleague Mark Huxley, who is not here today, because he is responding to the other issue, has been meeting with those principals through the relevant education executive lead. There is direct contact and communication with those schools around their timetable structure, around their staffing requirements, and what we can do to support their school communities.

MR HANSON: Page 206 of the annual report reports occupational violence incidents. There were 9,627, which is a 30 per cent increase on the previous year. I am wondering why that is the case and what you are doing about it.

Ms Berry: Yes, we are seeing an increase in reporting of violence in our schools, which is good. Overall, we are seeing an increase in workplace incident reports with parents involved and with young people involved. This seems to be happening across the country, and I do not think anybody can point to a specific matter. There is a reference to the long tail of COVID, with students now behaving differently because, five years ago, they did not get the social interactions that they would have got in those early years.

It does appear to be happening more within our primary school settings, which lends some credit to that concern. I do not know that there is any specific research that you could point to that says that, but if you talk to any teachers or any school professionals, that is definitely where things are landing, when it comes to why this is happening in our schools.

We are also seeing young people with much more complex lives, challenging behaviour and families with a whole bunch of different circumstances that are being managed by schools, which is compounding the situation. I can point to a couple of things. They are not immediate fixes; they are culture shift programs. That includes the Positive Behaviour for Learning program, which you have heard about. In addition, there is our inclusive schools work, which is an incredible piece of work that is making change in school communities and environments. The culture shift is significant and quite outstanding.

We are also seeing that the incidence of occupational violence is quite violent and different from what we have experienced previously, I would say.

MR HANSON: You have given an explanation for what is happening. The other part of my question is: what are we doing about it?

Ms Berry: There are a few things that we are doing locally, and nationally there are some decisions that have been made that will hopefully assist in how schools are responding to this. As well as responding to it, what are the skills and the tools that we are providing to teachers and staff so that they are able to manage this behaviour before it happens? That is quite a special skill set, and not everybody comes to education with an understanding about what that looks like.

Our Positive Behaviour for Learning program is a program of work that happens over a number of years and which encourages a culture change within schools through a variety of means, with expert coaches that work with schools, teachers and school staff to work with students and, importantly, having a student voice as part of that conversation on how they can make their school safer. It is all around respectful relationships, respectful behaviour and expectation setting along the way. That is not a tap that can be switched off overnight. It takes some time for the full program to be implemented and for that culture shift to happen.

The other piece of work is the inclusion work, which is part of our disability strategy within our public school system. That is about having psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists and others working with individual students in schools, with their families, with individual teachers, with students, and with everybody across the school to understand how a particular individual student will learn and how that student is as much a part of the school community as everybody else. It provides teachers with some really powerful tools to support everybody in the school in a much more positive way.

It is quite remarkable, when you go into a school and see that shift. It seems so obvious, and you wonder why schools have not been implementing that kind of support previously. As I said, we are seeing increases in managing that sort of complexity with

students.

We have to do a culture shift across a range of different areas, and provide teachers and school staff with the expertise, with that professional development. Instead of reacting to every situation that occurs, it is about being proactive and identifying the flags—see the red flags or the behaviour escalating and being able to manage it better. That will save everybody a whole lot of time and make our schools safer.

With the national approach, there is the school phone ban that we have all implemented. From all reports from teachers and school staff, that is making a difference to teaching and learning in our classes. We are not sure how the internet ban or social media ban will work, and how that will impact student behaviour, positively or negatively. We will wait and see.

MR HANSON: Where are we at, with the ban of mobile phones in schools?

Ms Berry: Where are we at? All our schools are managing phones in their schools—

MR HANSON: That has been successfully implemented now, has it?

Ms Berry: As far as I can tell.

Ms Spence: The review of the policy implementation feedback from stakeholders, including our students, was that it has helped with increased engagement in class settings, and less disruption. There will always be cases where some young people make decisions not to follow school policy, but the ways in which that is supported, in terms of contacting families, working through that to support the change in behaviour around that, is well established. All indications are that we have seen a positive impact across the system.

MR HANSON: But violence is up 30 per cent. I hear a lot of positive words about various things in this review and that review, but the reality is that the numbers are trending the wrong way. Page 168 talks about the prevention and management of occupational violence in ACT public schools review. Is that review published or is it ongoing? What is the status of that?

Ms Spence: The review into occupational violence has been finalised, and a listening report has been released. A new procedure and updates to the work health and safety policy have been finalised. As part of this, we have a new management of occupational violence procedure. We also have the management of psychosocial risk in schools procedure, to complement that. That is in full implementation during term 4. It is yet to go through its initial review, as part of the new policy and procedure release.

One of the things in that new procedure setting is to strengthen our root-cause analysis assessment, as part of the management of occupational violence. When we start talking about complex behaviour of students that contributes to occupational violence, which is the largest proportion in our dataset, it is about what we are going to do in terms of managing complex student behaviour and the way in which we work with young people, their families and our staff in schools to build capability to support students to engage safely.

MR HANSON: But the numbers keep going the wrong way. Every year, we come here and we hear the same well-meaning words—lots of processes, lots of reviews, lots of implementation, lots of consultation, and increasing violence. At what point do we need to take more substantive action? Are you reviewing the suspension policy?

Ms Spence: Yes, we absolutely know that those numbers are increasing. There are reports; there are double-ups in the data. Certainly, that is not an excuse for not doing anything. Our real focus and attention now, with the technical pieces of information having been developed, in terms of policy and procedures, is that we need to work on the capability and understanding the needs of complex students. As the minister talked about, the inclusion strategy, which is 1½ years into a 10-year strategy, is supporting us to better understand the individual needs of students and what is the appropriate professional—

MR HANSON: We have these inclusion strategies; they have been rolling along. We ban mobile phones. We have the national strategy. All of this is ongoing, but every year we come back and there is more violence. At what point do we realise that what is happening, what is being implemented, is not actually working?

Ms Wood: We are seeing reporting increase; we are seeing the number of incidents reported increase. Obviously, we encourage a strong reporting culture. We do not want to see that trending up, as it has been trending up. But there are other measures that we look at, when we look at the impact of those incidents. Certainly, for the directorate, serious workplace injury has been trending down, as we see in our workers compensation figures, which are on page 211. I do not have them immediately with me, but the days lost from those occupational violence incidents are also stable or reducing. The increase in incidents is not seeing that injury—

MR HANSON: The volume is up but the severity is down; is that what you are indicating?

Ms Wood: Potentially, yes. We are not seeing the severity that is leading to people actually not being in the workplace.

THE CHAIR: When are college enrolments—year 11 enrolments—typically finalised for the next year?

Ms Berry: Enrolments continue beyond the enrolment period. People will arrive in the city at different times. It has an end, but people can still enrol.

THE CHAIR: What is the typical—

Mr Crowther: In terms of that bulk round that I mentioned before, from enrolments opening until the end, all those offers would have gone out to families. As new enrolments come in, they are processed, if they were for wellbeing, through the process I described previously; otherwise the school will make those offers. Students in their priority enrolment areas are guaranteed a place at their priority enrolment area school, so they will be able to apply and be accommodated immediately in colleges. If you are referring to colleges providing information about subjects and those things, each college

will manage that process of timing a little differently. I suspect that is ongoing at the moment. In terms of being confirmed for your college, it is ongoing, but the overwhelming majority who have not applied more recently would have already received an offer from their college for next year.

THE CHAIR: When will the senior secondary language offerings be finalised for next year for incoming year 11 students, given the winding up of CIT Solutions and the external language school closure through that?

Ms Spence: Once your enrolment is accepted, senior secondary schools, year 11 and 12, go through a process of subject selection, which is probably already happening, as we speak. Once the subject selections come in for each individual school, schools then have the process to get all the subject selections and develop that into a schedule and a timetable.

Depending on the subject selections and the availability of staff—which has just been, through our transfer round, confirmed—they then do their magic, I will call it. They put it all together and look at how many people have selected, especially in the language space, where typically we get very low numbers, the availability of staff to offer those language offerings, together with the amount of students that have selected that as a particular language offering. That is all happening now.

Timetables for students to confirm their timetables and the courses that they are running are generally sent out, depending on when people enrol, between the end of the term and into the new year. As we get into the new year, should subject selections not be something that the student was able to get, they have an opportunity, under the BSSS rules, to adjust their subject selections in the first few weeks of school. Mr Martin Watson is here; he might be able to add some policy advice around that.

THE CHAIR: We might not have time. I want to ask very quickly whether the directorate is considering taking over management of the external senior secondary language school—just a yes or no as to whether that is under consideration at the moment.

Ms Spence: This is about the secondary school language programs?

THE CHAIR: Yes, if there is any consideration being given to jumping in and maintaining such an offering.

Ms Wood: We are looking at how we have the most impact with our offering. I think this happens on a very small scale, case by case—matching young people to language offerings at another school, if we can make those things line up. That is something that we are looking at for senior secondary.

THE CHAIR: Transferring kids to other schools, or giving them that option?

Ms Wood: Accessing, yes.

Ms Berry: Having a home campus, for example, and being able to access language education that is provided by another college, potentially.

THE CHAIR: You might go to Dickson College, but Narrabundah does German, so you go there for German classes or something like that?

Ms Spence: Yes. Certainly, you have curriculum options for language in the secondary as a pathway to have an out-of-area enrolment. We do have schools that are starting to align their timetables so that we can have subject selections across campus. That is currently happening with our vocational education programs, which require skilled vocational education teachers to do that. We are looking at options to further that work in the area of languages.

THE CHAIR: Thank you all for your work. I am sure you are all under-slept; thanks for jumping in as best you can. It was a terribly timed hearing for you, but I think it was actually very helpful for us, and probably for our community. Thank you very much for taking the time. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. For any questions taken on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*.

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

Health and Community Services Directorate

Arthy, Ms Kareena, Acting Director-General

Conway, Ms Sarah, Senior Director, Office for Seniors and Veterans

THE CHAIR: We welcome Ms Suzanne Orr MLA, Minister for Seniors and Veterans, and officials. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. When taking a question on notice, it will be useful if witnesses use the words, “I will take that question on notice.” This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We will go straight to questions. I have a question about the 2020-24 Age-Friendly City Plan. With the nature prescription trial, which was part of that; it looks like it is the only action that was not completed. In response to a question on notice, EPSDD indicated that it had been discontinued due to emerging high-priority environmental pressures and resourcing constraints. The task was to undertake targeted promotion of the nature prescriptions program through allied health practitioner networks and ACT Health. Why was this task assigned to EPSDD?

Ms Orr: This one pre-dates me, so I will look to Ms Conway to assist.

Ms Conway: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. At the time that the Age-Friendly City Plan was established, in 2020, it was an action that sat with the then Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate. With machinery-of-government changes and administrative arrangements that took place, the area that held responsibility for that section transferred into EPSDD, as part of that process.

THE CHAIR: I am still curious about why, with targeting promotion of the nature prescriptions program through allied health practitioner networks and ACT Health, it was with Transport Canberra and City Services.

Ms Conway: Because how such a program as the nature prescriptions program was rolled out was primarily through what was then a city services function, working closely with Health, but being led by city services at that time.

THE CHAIR: I am wondering, with it sitting, ultimately, with EPSDD rather than, say, ACT Health themselves, or within the now Health and Community Services Directorate, whether that contributed to it being the only task that was not completed. I imagine that the directorate have, as they have said, high-priority environmental pressures and resourcing constraints, and they might not see value in focusing on the health of seniors.

Ms Conway: That was never a concern that was raised with what was then the Community Services Directorate, as the lead with responsibility within ACT

government. The conversations that we had were around the existing programs that they had, particularly around their environmental volunteer programs, that had similar lines of work to what nature prescriptions was intending to achieve. Unfortunately, it was unable to be delivered within the term of the plan.

THE CHAIR: Are there any plans for the new plan to incorporate such an action or initiative?

Ms Conway: Discussions are still underway around the direction of what may be our next plan in the seniors portfolio. Obviously, there are a lot of considerations that we have to undertake, including the new Aged Care Act that has come into play, as well as the work that is being undertaken and led by the commonwealth, with the new national plan to end the abuse and mistreatment of older Australians. There have been no firm plans about what that would look like or potential carry-over of any actions into any future work.

THE CHAIR: Where is that up to? Did the drafting of the 2025-35 Age-Friendly City Plan begin in August 2024?

Ms Conway: Consultation was undertaken at that time. Obviously, we are in a new term of government, and that consideration needs to be held, and there are conversations that we are having with the minister and across the directorate around what the future looks like in that space.

THE CHAIR: When will that plan be launched?

Ms Conway: That timing has not yet been determined.

THE CHAIR: It is the 2025-35 plan. Will it be in 2026?

Ms Conway: At the time of consultation, that was the timing that was being looked at for the next strategy. Timeframes or scope of the next strategy have not yet been determined.

THE CHAIR: So it is definitely next year?

Ms Orr: It is not going to be this year.

Ms Conway: It is not this year.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any concerns about that, Minister, given the previous plan expired last year; so all year we have not had a plan?

Ms Orr: Mr Emerson, I think there is an assumption that there is not work going on or that, without a plan, nothing is happening. I do not think that is—

THE CHAIR: No, it was just a statement.

Ms Orr: It is not quite correct. There is actually quite a lot of work that continues to go on. The principles continue to guide the focus, and particularly in matters that will

continue to arise, and with how that is worked through, in regard to having a specific plan. This is something that I have been discussing through the ministerial council as well, in taking on the portfolio. The consultation has been undertaken, but there was no funding to progress further. We would have to go through our budgetary processes, and I cannot pre-empt the outcomes of those, as to what they may be.

Again, there has still been a lot of work continuing within the portfolio, in looking at how we can build on the principles that underline the Age-Friendly City Strategy, and what we have signed up to through the various agreements that that reflects. What I am saying is that the work continues, along with those principles, irrespective of whether or not we have the plan in place. We will continue to look at the best positioning for a plan, in line with our budget processes and government consideration.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to provide any indication of the likely timeline for a new plan, and the likely duration of the new plan, if it is in 2026?

Ms Orr: It would be subject to a budget and cabinet decisions, so I could not pre-empt them.

MISS NUTTALL: I am interested in the Age Friendly Suburbs Program. The Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing, in its submission to the 2025-26 budget consultation, recommended the extended rollout of the Age Friendly Suburbs Program to create safe and accessible neighbourhoods. It does not look like this program was mentioned in the 2025-26 budget. What is the government's plan to ensure that the ACT's built environment is safe and accessible for seniors?

Ms Orr: I will defer to Ms Conway, but I believe it sits with city services.

Ms Conway: The Age Friendly Suburbs Program is led by the City and Environment Directorate.

THE CHAIR: Before moving on from the Age-Friendly City Plan, has there been communication with the stakeholders? When I was searching for the new plan, I found heaps of submissions into that consultation process that people have published online—COTA and so on. Have they been told what is going on? Have they been informed that there is no 2025 plan?

Ms Conway: Conversations have definitely been ongoing, particularly with the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing, and with Council on the Ageing ACT. More broadly, conversations have not been held outside direct approaches that have been made to the directorate. Because we do not have a timeframe, we are yet to provide a public messaging piece around that.

THE CHAIR: Do I have this right, Minister Orr: the reason for not immediately carrying on the work that was done in the first half of last year, essentially, is a change of government and a new minister. I am trying to understand the delay.

Ms Orr: Again, some of this pre-dates me. I was advised, when I came into the role, that consultation had occurred, but there was no policy commitment or funding associated with steps beyond consultation.

THE CHAIR: It is the 2025-35 plan, so it is implicit that there is a plan. They were consulting on a new plan that was supposed to start this year, so at some point a decision has been made not to do that.

Ms Orr: Mr Emerson—

THE CHAIR: That is fine; it was before your time.

Ms Orr: It was a different minister who made the decision to progress with consultation—

THE CHAIR: That is my question.

Ms Orr: at the point that they had the consultation. That was not me; that was in the previous term of government and the previous minister. I can only speculate as to what their rationale or thinking was. I am not going to speculate. I do not think it is worthwhile doing that. All I can point to is the advice that I was provided with, when coming into the portfolio. The policy and the funding would have to be taken through our standard processes before things could progress further.

THE CHAIR: Was the decision not to have the plan ready this year and launched this year made by the prior minister or was that made based on that advice that you received?

Ms Orr: I am not—

THE CHAIR: I think that is a very reasonable question to ask about the decision.

Ms Orr: I am just trying to think how to answer it, because I do not think the two things are quite the same. I am not privy to the decisions of the previous minister, so I could not conclusively tell you what was or was not in that. All I can say is that the minister did consult. When I came into the portfolio, with the progression of the plan, it is standard for all plans that they do not just get done; you still need to have policy approval, and you still need to have budgetary processes and considerations to do the work. The advice to me was that those things would need to be done before things could be further progressed.

THE CHAIR: You made a decision not to do that until further down the track?

Ms Orr: No, I do not think that is quite right. It is fair to say that we will go through our processes, and we have the election commitment that there is the intention to do it. Mr Emerson, with all these things, again, we have to go through our processes. There are competing priorities. There are different approvals. At the end of the day it is what it is, but, as I said, what we can continue to do is to look at the principles and values that underpin that plan and that strategy; there is work that we will do across government, so that we are still addressing the focus and the intentions of it, while also looking at progressing the next plan. There is not a stop; there is a continuum there, even if it does not look like a specific document.

MR HANSON: Page 117 of the Community Services annual report outlines the ACT

government's progress on a recommendation to support the establishment of a veterans wellbeing centre in the ACT, which includes working with RSL LifeCare to make sure that the veterans hub in Queanbeyan is accessible to ACT residents. Can you give me an update on how that work is progressing?

Ms Orr: This has been one of the key priorities for a number of people in the community, as well as for the ministerial council that advises me. Certainly, Mr Hanson, I think you are well across some of the concerns that have been out in the community for quite a while, as to how the Queanbeyan centre will best support the ACT, as well the broader New South Wales region that it services. A lot of the work, since I have been in the portfolio, has involved the ministerial council and RSL LifeCare, noting that they have the federal contract for the wellbeing hub. That ship has sailed; that is where it is going to be. It is about how best we can give our feedback to RSL LifeCare to make sure that what they are offering, their service delivery, is reflecting the needs of the local community.

As I said, there has been quite a lot of work done. I will hand over to Ms Conway to run through it, because she is the one who has been going to all the various meetings and so forth.

Ms Conway: The Queanbeyan hub has been operational since April. In terms of site delivery and services within the ACT, RSL LifeCare has set up a space for provision of service in Lyneham. It is at an existing RSL LifeCare aged-care facility. They are delivering services, including physio and psychology support services, each day of the week from there.

There have been ongoing conversations, particularly with the leadership team of the Ministerial Advisory Council for Veterans and their Families, and RSL LifeCare executive, in relation to their thinking about broadening the scope of service delivery within the ACT. RSL LifeCare, in response to that, has recently established an interagency working group, which includes government, veteran services and mainstream community service organisations, to come together to look at opportunities to be able to ensure an integrated service delivery system and the provision of services throughout the ACT.

That group had its first meeting today. Obviously, the establishment and setting of the terms of reference for that group is a key priority, as well as setting priorities for the next six to 12 months regarding what will be actioned in that space.

Ms Orr: The establishment of this committee came about through the advocacy of MACVF and me, in seeking meetings and writing to RSL LifeCare about the concerns that we had and asking them to engage in addressing some of those concerns. It is probably fair to note that they have been very open and receptive. I think that is indicated by the steps they have taken to put this committee together, to bring those different views to the table. As they continue to develop the wellbeing hub, it should be noted that they intend to grow it. It will not necessarily provide a full service from day one. As they continue to grow it, more of those views from the ACT community will be fed into what they are doing.

It is fair to say, from the feedback I have received from the advisory council, that they

are open to participating and they are leaning into this process. I think they will continue to be quite robust in the feedback they provide and the expectations that they have. Certainly, there is an acknowledgement on all sides that working together to try and get it right is certainly where we are at, and it is something that we are committed to.

MISS NUTTALL: I am interested in asking about aged care, while being mindful that there is overlap with both Health and the commonwealth. I am hoping you might be able to answer, in the capacity in which you are here today.

The commonwealth government's new Support at Home program will cover clinical supports for eligible patients, like nursing and physiotherapy. However, assistance to shower, use the bathroom or take medication will incur co-payments. This will mean that those with limited funds will essentially have to ration the services they request for help—whether they get help with showering or eating that day. We are worried that this might have a number of flow-on effects, such as making it less feasible for seniors to remain in their homes for longer. It might put more pressure on carers and residential care, and make it more likely that there will be an increase in preventable hospitalisations.

With all of that in mind, how does the ACT government plan to work with the commonwealth government to prevent this fallout from occurring?

Ms Orr: I think Ms Arthy is about to jump in and say that this probably sits with Health.

Ms Arthy: The detail of your question does sit with the Health area of the department. We will take it on notice and come back to you with a more detailed answer.

MISS NUTTALL: That is very kind; thank you. If you have been made aware of any providers who will be providing services under the Support at Home package, we would be grateful for that detail. Has it come up, or has it been an item for consideration with the ministerial council for seniors?

Ms Orr: The reforms in the broader sense definitely come up. I would have to go back and check my notes specifically regarding those issues. Certainly, with the broader reforms, we do get feedback on them. That is the sort of thing that we pass on to the relevant areas across government, for that feedback.

MISS NUTTALL: Has there been specific feedback on the concerns about the eligibility and the challenges for folks who are living on a low income?

Ms Orr: I must admit that I do not necessarily stay for the whole meeting. The minister gets invited to hear what they want to tell me; then I go on my way. I do meet with the executive, and they will raise matters with me. Ms Conway does attend for the whole meeting.

Ms Conway: The specific details that you have raised have not been raised by members of the ministerial advisory council with the directorate. Of course, if they were to raise any such concerns, as the minister said, we would pass that on to the relevant area within government, noting that the Health stream is the lead area for this work.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes, of course. Lastly, on the subject, I am assuming that your role involves some amount of advocacy on behalf of seniors. What do you anticipate that your oversight, scrutiny and accountability role will be in these reforms as they roll out? I am mindful that it will be seniors who are most affected by them, whether they go well or not.

Ms Orr: Again, going to the specific issue that you have noted, as Ms Conway said, and to the best of my recollection, we have not had that specific one raised. I will talk in a general, broader sense regarding the reforms. Certainly, it is something, particularly, for the health minister, as well as the Attorney-General, because some of the federal reform stuff is discussed in the Attorney-General's forums.

It is something about which we will have joint briefings. I will provide input into matters, when they have to be taken forward. I also meet with both of those ministers. Sometimes it is not a formal meeting; sometimes I just send them a message or pop around to their office and have a chat, when we need to. Certainly, the directorates work pretty consistently in joining up across government the various different briefings and feedback that have to go into the shared decision areas. The information definitely gets shared, from the different perspectives, and it is all brought together.

MS TOUGH: I am interested in the response to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. The annual report talks about the commonwealth releasing its response in December last year, and the ACT government is working with the commonwealth. What does that actually look like, and what is the ACT government doing in that space at the moment?

Ms Orr: Again, I will get Ms Conway to run through that one. It is quite a big piece of work. A lot of it does sit with the federal government, through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, but there are some important areas of contribution from the states and territories. We continue to work through what that looks like with the commonwealth. Ms Conway can certainly give you an update on how that is progressing.

Ms Conway: Through formal commonwealth, state and territory bodies, such as the Veterans' Ministerial Council and the Commonwealth, State and Territory Committee, there is ongoing discussion in relation to the response to the royal commission. The commonwealth has identified that there are 17 recommendations that have responsibility shared between the commonwealth and states and territories. The commonwealth has identified four key recommendations as priorities for a collaborative effort in relation to that.

There have been ongoing conversations with relevant areas within not only the Department of Veterans' Affairs, but also the federal Attorney-General's Department, which has been responsible for the establishment of the task force to respond to the royal commission.

We have had the establishment of the Defence and Veterans' Service Commission, which was established on 29 September. There has been a conversation with ACT government officials, including the Chief Magistrate and the Coroners Court, in relation to that work, to ensure that there is an understanding of how the ACT system works,

and how that can work alongside the commission to support incarcerated veterans, and look to prevent suicide and mental health impacts within the veteran community.

There have also been ongoing conversations with Open Arms at a jurisdictional level, with each jurisdiction, in relation to some postvention services and support offerings that they have, with a particular focus on looking to be able to roll out services with national consistency where possible.

MS TOUGH: Ensuring that whatever we are doing here, other states and territories are doing almost the same thing, if possible, so that if someone moves between—

Ms Conway: Obviously, due to the nature of veteran service, relocation and posting are part of their lifestyle. We know the impacts that that has on veterans and their families, and we want to be able to work holistically to support that. We are in the process of establishing an ACT government interdirectorate committee, which will ensure that we bring together the expertise across the various areas.

Obviously, while we hold the veterans portfolio, as the lead within the Health and Community Services Directorate, a number of the areas that are talked to within the recommendations from the royal commission sit within other directorates. We need to ensure that, as the data owners for their various systems and functions, they have an understanding of the nature of veteran life, and that we, reciprocally, have an understanding of their infrastructure and resourcing, and are able to support them to improve their systems.

MR HANSON: I am pretty sure that, last time we were here, Minister, we talked about a northside memorial; do you remember that?

Ms Orr: I do remember that, yes.

MR HANSON: Has there been any progress on that, or are there any more thoughts as to whether the ACT government will get involved?

Ms Orr: I must admit, Mr Hanson, that, since we last spoke, with the issues coming forward to me, this one has not been at the top, or the most pressing one. This was the RSL group; it was to put something in Gungahlin.

MR HANSON: Yes, it was the combined RSLs, saying that there are quite a few memorials central and south, but there is nothing north and, for a lot of older veterans, getting about town can be difficult.

Ms Orr: If I remember correctly, at the time, we were very open to continuing that conversation.

MR HANSON: That is right. I am just wondering whether that has continued.

Ms Orr: No, and no-one has been chasing us up to do it. Given your prompt, I dare say we will run away and have that conversation, so next time we are here we can give you a proper update.

MR HANSON: Bravo; all right.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, the annual report highlights that more government services are moving online. Yet many older Canberrans lack the reliable digital access or confidence when using online systems such as MyWay+. Why is the government pushing digital first services without ensuring seniors can use them?

Ms Orr: I am not sure I agree with the premise of the question—that there is a push there and that not necessarily everyone can use them. This goes across a couple of different areas. I will speak to the work that we do—and I will get officials to provide greater detail—and the work that we support in improving digital literacy and making it accessible to helping older Canberrans and other people who just are not as confident with using digital technologies. That is probably the perspective that we can best provide for our portfolio responsibilities.

Ms Conway: Obviously, we are very mindful that there is a cohort within the seniors population who may not be confident in using online platforms but still need to access these services. COTA ACT are a really key partner with the seniors portfolio in supporting older Canberrans. They run a program called Get IT. It first came about in 2020—obviously COVID presented a number of issues in services moving online—and they have continued to run that program since 2020 with very high uptake. It supports individuals to be able to build their confidence using digital devices, whether it is their mobile phone, tablets or laptops and to gain an understanding of how to access information online safely. Some years we also receive applications through the Seniors Grant Program for IT programs. They have a very strong push in terms of access to services for the population, which we are very keen to support.

But I would say that we are seeing a trend in older members of our community being confident in using online platforms. They are very mindful of being safe when doing so, which we absolutely want to encourage. There has been a lot of messaging that has gone out over recent years in terms of being mindful of scams et cetera. I think that the senior population is very wary about where they provide information but are becoming more confident in being able to access those platforms, if needed.

MS CASTLEY: Has the directorate considered or committed to reintroducing face-to-face or more phone-based service options for seniors, for those high-use areas for seniors? Is that something that you would be considering?

Ms Conway: We in the Office for Seniors and Veterans definitely have a phone line that members of the public and constituents do contact us on. A number of the key service delivery partners within the seniors portfolio also have a variety of face-to-face service options. For example, COTA deliver services from libraries on a weekly basis and they move around the city. They get a very high uptake of engagement across a breadth of areas, whether it is COTA-specific services or looking to access broader information in relation to supports for older Canberrans.

Also, senior centres are a really key contact point from both the perspective of accessing information but also the social connection element for older members of our community. They play a really critical hub model in the provision of services and still have traditional pamphlets available on a suite of services et cetera, which are heavily taken

up by members.

MR HANSON: Very good. Could you me an update on the activities of the Veterans Advisory Council and any particular recommendations they might have provided to you, Minister, on the issue of betterment of veterans.

Ms Orr: Yes, heaps. They are definitely one of most active councils—and I say that in a very appreciative way. As we have already discussed, the wellbeing hub has been a particular focus of the council. I think it is fair to say that that has been a continuing and significant piece of work where we are actually seeing some progress and traction made on. The ministerial council has also provided me with advice on what they would see as the priorities within the range of commitments that have been made for the ACT community and where should be putting our focus. Those are the two really big substantive ones.

We got an update recently on exploring homelessness amongst the veteran community and how to better understand the experiences of veterans who are experiencing homelessness and the contributing factors and how that perspective can be better worked into responses that the states and territories are putting in place. Sarah, is there anything you want to jump in with? I could keep going. I can keep rolling them off, but Sarah might have a few she wants to speak to.

Ms Conway: The only other thing I would probably add, linked to the royal commission work, is that the advisory council did lodge a submission to the Department of Veterans' Affairs in relation to the establishment of the national peak body for the ESO sector. They did some quite significant consultation and conversations within their networks to inform what they felt a model for a peak body could look like. Obviously, they then provide that information and advice to the minister here. While DVA is leading that work, we are very keen to ensure that the voices of the ACT community—

MR HANSON: Has DVA reached out to ask about that, have they?

Ms Orr: I think there was a public consultation on it, and the ministerial council submitted to the consultation. So it was not an ACT government submission; it was the council.

MR HANSON: These are federal being led by DVA, was it?

Ms Conway: That is correct.

Ms Orr: The federal consultation, yes. The ministerial council, I think it is fair to say, had some fairly strong views and they wanted to provide their feedback. As the council they—

MR HANSON: Do you know what their views were? Can you express those?

Ms Orr: Mr Hanson, I might see if the council is happy to provide the information—because, again, it was not a government position; it was the council providing their input as members and representatives of their community. So we will take it on notice as to what we can come back with.

MR HANSON: Did you then pass that on to DVA, or did you—

Ms Orr: It was submitted by the council.

MR HANSON: Okay.

Ms Orr: It was submitted by the council, with a copy provided to me for information. But, again, I will respect the council, and I might just take it on notice and get back to you.

MR HANSON: Talking about peak bodies, do you engage or have you engaged with other veterans bodies—the RSL, Legacy and so on?

Ms Orr: Yes.

MISS NUTTALL: I am interested to know whether you or any part of ACT government holds data on the proportion of veterans who live in the ACT who are prescribed medicinal cannabis.

Ms Orr: I do not believe I hold data on that, though Health might. I think that is a question you would have to put to them. I am hesitant to take it on notice just in case it is not something they would actually do.

MISS NUTTALL: Okay. Do you know if ACT Policing—and bear with me; it will relate back—enforce licence suspension or take any other measure against drivers who undertake a roadside test and have prescribed cannabis medication in their system? My reason for asking is whether this potential problem has been raised to government by the Ministerial Advisory Council for Veterans and their Families.

Ms Orr: As to whether it has been raised by the council, I do not—

Ms Conway: It has not been raised by the council to the directorate.

MISS NUTTALL: Okay; that is helpful. Do you believe that it would strengthen inclusion and participation of veterans if those who used medicinal cannabis were able to drive the morning after using their prescribed medication without risking their licence?

Ms Orr: I think that is bordering on asking me for a personal opinion. Given it is not a matter that has really been raised with me or I have been briefed on—and I could not tell you what the government's view is—I might just politely decline to answer the question.

MISS NUTTALL: Got you. So just confirming that this has not been raised with you or with the office from any stakeholders or community members? Okay. That is helpful to understand.

MS TOUGH: The annual report talks about \$80,000 in seniors grants and \$80,000 in the veterans grant program. I am just wondering what these kinds of grants covered and

whether \$80,000 was the full scale of each program—so whether they were fully subscribed or not.

Ms Orr: Ms Conway may want to run through this. But, just before I hand over to Ms Conway, I would say that the grants are actually quite an interesting component of allowing that flexibility for groups to come forward with different ideas and initiatives that will support both veterans and seniors. Particularly within the veterans ones, which we have had a bit more of recently, there have been some really different types of projects that you would not necessarily think of—for example, Table Tennis ACT supporting veterans to get involved in playing table tennis, which also feeds into Invictus Games, because it is one of the sports you can play for that and just making those connections across the broader community. But I will let Ms Conway run through the details, as opposed to me just sitting here saying how much I really enjoyed playing table tennis with veterans.

Ms Conway: Thanks, Minister. Each of the respective grant programs has a total of \$80,000 available. We have set priority areas within each of those grant programs. Within the seniors portfolio, a focus is on the respect and inclusion of older Canberrans. There is also a category focused on awareness of abuse and mistreatment of older people and supported decision-making, which we know is a key area of focus within that portfolio.

Some examples where we often see applications come through within that round is in relation to social connection activities. That could be, for example, through the arts or through volunteering programs. Last year we saw a number of applications come through from our multicultural communities, which was a shift that we had not seen in previous rounds. But we do know that there are particular needs within older demographics of multicultural communities. So we were able to have particular investment in there.

In our veterans round, we have a focus on veteran and family wellbeing, and we do see a great breadth of applications coming through that have both a focus primarily on the veteran or those which are for the broader family unit. The minister mentioned Table Tennis ACT, which came through. We have also supported programs to be run by Legacy, including social connection concerts, some Anzac Day commemorations and peace ceremonies working with schools—so having an intergenerational aspect there of where there could be Defence children at those schools as well. We have previously funded veterans fishing days, day activities et cetera.

Currently the Seniors Grant Program for 2025-26 is open and is due to close in late January. We have recently just closed the Veterans Grant Program for this year and are in an assessment phase.

MS TOUGH: Was there anyone in the last year of grants that missed out?

Ms Conway: There was. Both grant rounds were oversubscribed last year.

Ms Orr: I think you would be hard-pressed to find any grant round that is not oversubscribed. It is a continual back and forth as to where you set the bar, because there are always lots of ideas. But, in practice, those grants are there to support these

different ideas, and we are always going to have more ideas than we can potentially fund, because there are lots of creative, interesting aspects out there.

MS TOUGH: Given they were fully subscribed at \$80,000 each, how big are the grants? What size do they range between?

Ms Conway: Within the Seniors Grant Program for this year, applicants are able to apply for up to \$10,000. Within the veterans portfolio, applications up to \$15,000 are eligible. The reason we have that variance is because the Seniors Grant Program is heavily oversubscribed; whereas, in the Veterans Grant Program space, it is still oversubscribed but we see a lower number in total of applications, and know that there are more limited funding opportunities for some of that seed, on-the-ground, work within the veterans portfolio. So we really want to support that.

MR HANSON: On those grants, can you explain, beyond ping-pong, what we have got happening at the moment? It sounds good, though. I am a big fan. I will give you a game anytime, Minister.

Ms Orr: As in within the grants?

MR HANSON: Yes, the grants that get provided for seniors and veterans. I am just wondering what specifically has been provided for veterans in the ACT.

Ms Orr: In answering your question, it is probably less about the grants because the grants are there to enable community groups with those smaller-based projects to get them off the ground and to put their thinking towards how they could support those communities. I think your question is not really about the grants; it is more about the broader supports that are there for veterans. Is that correct?

MR HANSON: Well both, I suppose. Who is asking for these grants and what are they, broadly? Then, I suppose, what other specific supports are being provided—specifically for veterans, not just generic? Are there any specific programs that are rolling out? I know there is the employment one we have talked about before in the ACT government, but is there anything else?

Ms Orr: For the 2024-25 Veterans Grant Program, I have a list of the recipients here. The Legacy Club of Canberra Incorporated put forward a Legacy concert to allow families to come along and enjoy a relaxed afternoon of live musical performances. There was the Cuppacumbalong Foundation, which did a blacksmithing for defence families. That was a program for hands-on blacksmithing courses aimed at supporting veterans. Woden Valley RSL Sub-branch supported the annual primary schools ANZAC and Peace Ceremony, allowing up to 500 students across 23 schools to attend. There was the ACT table tennis association, which was the improving wellbeing through table tennis, as we have discussed. That program was in partnership with Soldier On.

The Australian Outward Bound Development Fund did the Outward Bound veterans and families connection weekend, a facilitated overnight camping adventure with high ropes, climbing and abseiling adventures. It was probably not for those who dislike heights, but worked in with bushcraft and just time to talk around campfire and connect.

42Casts Limited did a veterans fishing day—getting veterans out to have a spot of fishing and then, apparently, they barbecued their catch. I have not had it confirmed if they caught anything to barbecue, but that was the intention. Dogs Canberra did a pilot program, which is aiming to improve mental health and rehabilitate rescue dogs by matching them with their veteran families and supporting the care. That was, I think, quite a well-received program as well. We got quite a bit of feedback on that one as to how appreciated it was.

Those grants programs are broad, so that you do have that ability for groups to come forward with a lot of different ideas. You would not necessarily think that blacksmithing is something. But, again, it is embraced and supported within the community.

So that is the grant side of it. As to what the ACT government does to support, there is quite a bit across government. I will get Ms Conway to maybe run through the long list a little bit more, but some of the stuff includes the employment program that we have spoken about in the past. We have done a bit of work around the veterans liaison officers. It was previously a DVA-facilitated program, but it is not something that they have continued. So we have actually stepped in and seen what we can do to actually get more support for veterans within our hospital system and veterans focussed supports. We have put in the new veterans lounge at the hospital, which was opened in the last 12 months. Ms Conway, feel free to jump in—because I am just trying to think off the top of my head.

Ms Conway: The other key update would be that, to date, we have held two veterans and families expos, and there was a commitment in the last budget for that to be held again. That procurement is currently out, with a number of veteran organisations approached to see if they would be interested in leading that. Then we will move into an assessment phase for that procurement, with the intent that that will be held by the end of May next year.

MS BARRY: You mentioned that you saw a few grants come through for the multicultural community. Can you describe what sorts of programs they were looking to put forward?

Ms Orr: I think that was on the seniors side.

Ms Conway: Yes.

Ms Orr: I have the list here if you want me to run through them?

Ms Conway: Yes; thank, Minister.

Ms Orr: I have the list of the seniors grants, particularly the ones from the multicultural community. The Australian Chinese Culture Exchange did a Healthy Food and Happy Dance for Seniors event. The Multicultural Association of Canberra Incorporated provided elderly abuse and digital literacy workshops, specifically focused on the CALD community. The Bangladeshi Seniors Club Canberra put on Positive Ageing for Canberra's Bangladeshi Seniors, a series of organised community activities such as dinners, cultural activities and information sessions to improve connections for seniors within the Bangladeshi community.

The Canberra Girit Association of Fiji Incorporated did a seniors outreach program, focusing on social inclusion, education and awareness of elder abuse. The ACT Chinese Women Cultural Association Incorporated ACT did a range of workshops on “Spend our old age happily and safely”, which looked at a range of topics, including health and nutrition, art and craft, gardening and digital literacy. The Philippine Australian Association of the ACT and the Monaro Region Incorporated ran a wellbeing program of workshops, seminars on lots of educational themes, and fitness sessions for the local community.

The Australian Multicultural Action Network Incorporated ran the “Empowering Elders: Promoting Respect, Inclusion, and Safety for Older Canberrans” program, focusing on social connection activities, on education around elder abuse—what it is and where to get supports. They also had stuff on supported decision-making and advocacy. The ACT Chinese Australian Association Inc had a grant to establish a Chinese cultural social hub-style learning program. That looked at skills to enjoy community life. Integrated Cultures ACT Inc had a grant for a program of yoga sessions and an aromatherapy workshop.

I think I have hopefully covered them all. There were other groups that got grants, but were not necessarily multicultural groups.

MS BARRY: Thank you. Is there any broader strategic work to understand some of the issues in the multicultural community around elder abuse—understanding that the population is growing with children bringing their parents to look after their younger children, that there are unique characteristics there? Is any broader strategic work being done to identify those issues?

Ms Orr: Yes. Again, I will get Ms Conway to go through the detail, but my understanding is that it is a priority within the communities to focus on elder abuse, particularly given that there are language barriers and coming to a new country and not being familiar with the systems and institutions that you would look to for support and access if that was the case. But, again, Ms Conway can run you through the detail of that.

Ms Conway: We work closely with our colleagues in Multicultural ACT within the directorate but also with the Human Rights Commission, who leads what is now known as the Elder Abuse Prevention Network, which is bringing together key stakeholders within the seniors portfolio who have a responsibility or deliver services where elder abuse or signs indicating elder abuse may be presented. That is chaired by Karen Toohey, as the commissioner. There is conversation that does occur within that group from time to time in relation to multicultural communities. It has also come up in conversations with the commonwealth in relation to the national plan, with jurisdictions collectively looking at how we can look to support multicultural communities in this space particularly.

MISS NUTTALL: This question should, hopefully, be quite a short and exploratory one.

Ms Orr: Now that you have said that it is not going to be.

THE CHAIR: You have three minutes to explore.

MISS NUTTALL: Fantastic; well, let's get into it. COTA has previously called for a program to use food as a tool to improve health and bring positive, social and environmental change. Has there been any consideration given to this idea?

Ms Orr: Miss Nuttall, as you have noted, COTA has previously raised this, and we continue to have discussions. All of those sorts of proposals would need to go through our standard processes, budget considerations and so forth. It is certainly something that continues to be a discussion. COTA have many priorities that they put forward, and we always take our steer every year from what they see as being the higher priorities and we work through from that perspective. I do not think this one has come up too recently, though.

Ms Conway: This one has not come through of late—at least not to the directorate. But, as the minister said, it would need to go through formal channels for a proposal to be lodged.

MISS NUTTALL: It looks like it did go through the ACT's Ministerial Council on Aging. I believe it went through their budget submission, if that is a useful reference, from back in 2024. So if you are looking for a more official reference, that seems to be the last time that people have raised that.

Ms Orr: Which I think goes to what I was saying in that it has definitely been raised in the past and it has been part of a discussion. But when I sit down and think about the things that get raised with me at the most recent meetings and so forth, this is not necessarily in the mix.

MISS NUTTALL: That is helpful to know. Thank you.

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

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank our witnesses who have assisted us through their experience and knowledge. I also thank Broadcasting and Hansard for their support and the secretary for theirs. If a member wishes to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliamentary portal as soon as possible and no later than five business days from today. This meeting is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 3.28 pm