



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2007-2008

(Reference: Appropriation Bill 2007-2008)

Members:

MR M GENTLEMAN (The Chair)
MR B STEFANIAK (The Deputy Chair)
MS M PORTER
DR D FOSKEY
MRS J BURKE

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 15 JUNE 2007

Secretary to the committee:
Ms G Concannon (Ph: 6205 0129)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

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The committee met at 2.00 pm.

HEDLEY, MR TONY, President, Property Council of Australia, ACT Division
WHEELER, MR CHRIS, Council Member, Property Council of Australia, ACT Division

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to this inquiry by the Select Committee on Estimates 2007-2008 into the budget process. This afternoon we will have submissions and presentations from community groups. We will start with Chris Wheeler and Tony Hedley for the Property Council of Australia. Welcome, gentlemen. Before we begin, I will read out the privileges card and then I will go through some formalities.

The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and rebroadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules contained in the resolution agreed by the Assembly on 7 March 2002 concerning the broadcasting of Assembly and committee proceedings. Before the committee commences taking evidence, let me place on record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee in evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attach to parliament, its members and others, necessary to the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, if the committee accedes to such a request, the committee will take evidence in camera and record that evidence. Should the committee take evidence in this manner, I remind the committee and those present that it is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly. I should add that any decision regarding publication of in camera evidence or confidential submissions will not be taken by the committee without prior reference to the person whose evidence the committee may consider publishing.

I remind witnesses and members to turn off mobile phones while you are in here. We would like a response to questions on notice within five working days of the question being asked. We will email the transcript to you as soon as we can. We will be having a break for afternoon tea at 3.30 pm. After that we will have a short private meeting to discuss some issues that have come up. Volunteering ACT apparently is not able to come this afternoon, so we will have that private meeting in that space, if that is okay with the rest of the members.

Mr Wheeler and Mr Hedley, welcome again this afternoon. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Hedley: Thank you, chair. I have a very short opening statement. Last year the ACT government initially projected a deficit of at least \$80 million for the 2006-07 financial year. The reality now is that this entire amount has been paid off in one year as a result of significant additional taxes applied mainly against the residential and commercial property sector. For example, stamp duty on conveyances has risen from the \$157 million estimated to \$198 million. This equates to an increase of over 25 per cent in one year. We believe, in fact, that the final figure for the end of the

current financial year may well be an underestimate, that \$198 million, and that is based on anecdotal evidence from commercial conveyancing practices around Canberra. We think that the figure could well top \$200 million easily, but we won't know that until July.

For the 2007-08 financial year, the government is projecting less stamp duty on conveyances. Again, we believe that this will turn out to be a significant underestimate of revenue, as many significant transactions are due to occur over the next year. In fact, it is our submission that ACT Treasury persistently—year in, year out—grossly underestimate the amount of revenue from stamp duty, and an analysis of previous years' budget papers will bear this out. As I said, for the current financial year, a 25 per cent underestimate; the previous years show the same sorts of amounts.

We also believe that there is a significant underestimate in the dividends to be paid by the Land Development Agency for 2007-08. The budget papers themselves do not take account of announcements made by the Chief Minister and the Treasurer several weeks ago. For example, if you have a look at this document here, the Australian Capital Territory budget document for 2007-08, page 21 talks about the sale of commercial property in the current year. It totally ignores the Treasurer's own announcement about section 63, which was made two weeks before the budget documents, which we think will be sold for somewhere between \$30 million and \$40 million. It fails to take account of the Chief Minister's statement in relation to the QE2 site, which we think will be another \$25 million. It fails to take account of announcements made by the Chief Minister on the sale of additional sites in Constitution Avenue. We believe that in the city area alone there could be an underestimate of dividends from the Land Development Agency of upwards of \$100 million in revenue.

Mr Wheeler: Just to put that in context, the actual number that is shown for the next financial year as projected for the gross floor area is 4,600 metres. The section 63 development—that is, the site across from the lakeside—is, to give you an idea, 70,000 metres on its own. The QE2 site is reputed to be—it is not public; it is one of those behind-the-scenes deals—40,000 metres. So that is over 100,000 metres on those two sites alone, let alone Constitution Avenue, whilst reported here is 4,600.

Mr Hedley: Each year Treasury persistently underestimate revenue from the property section. If they were an offender, you would call them a serial offender. Secondly, we believe that the time is now right for the significant tax burden on the property sector to be reviewed and lessened. We were astonished to see in the 2007-08 budget that there was no relief given to residential property investors, with extraordinarily high levels of land tax being applied. To elaborate on that point, I got some figures out from the national office of the property council which took as an average a \$250,000 block of land right across Australia in terms of land tax. If the unimproved capital value of your block of land is \$250,000, in Victoria you pay \$300 a year; in New South Wales you pay nothing; in Queensland you pay nothing; in Western Australia you pay nothing; in South Australia you pay \$420; in Tasmania, \$1,200; and in the ACT, \$2,800. Across the border, if you have a block of land which is worth \$250,000 you pay zero. If you are in the ACT you pay \$2,800.

DR FOSKEY: Sorry, would you mind giving me the figure again for the unimproved

capital value?

Mr Hedley: It is \$250,000. If we take an extreme case, \$750,000 as your unimproved capital value, in Victoria you pay \$1,900; New South Wales, \$6,800; Queensland, \$2,200; Western Australia, \$1,600; South Australia, \$5,400; and the ACT, \$10,500. And the government wonders why people are not investing in investment residential housing. The returns are lousy, and that has a flow-on effect in terms of the availability and stock level of investment residential housing in the territory. The returns from other sorts of investments are significantly greater elsewhere in Australia.

MR STEFANIAK: Could you give me those figures again, Mr Hedley?

Mr Hedley: Victoria, \$1,900; New South Wales \$6,800; Queensland, \$2,200; Western Australia, \$1,650; South Australia, \$5,400, and the ACT, \$10,500. That is the top of the market for \$750,000. That acts as a positive disincentive to the creation of residential investment housing. That, in our opinion, is one of the causes why we have so little residential investment housing in Canberra and part of the problem of a tight housing market in the territory.

MS PORTER: Mr Hedley, could you explain to the committee whether those figures are for across the whole of New South Wales, for instance? Excuse my ignorance, but would there be any variation in that between someone who owned or was purchasing a property in some country town and, say, Sydney?

Mr Hedley: I don't believe so.

Mr Wheeler: No.

Mr Hedley: My knowledge—and Chris is confirming it now—is that the rate of land tax is the same whether it is for Darlinghurst in Sydney or Dubbo. In other words, if your UCV is \$250,000, it applies across the board in New South Wales.

MS PORTER: I just wanted to clarify that. So it is not a capital city rate as such.

Mr Hedley: No.

Mr Wheeler: The only exemption in New South Wales really lies around rural land, primary production.

MR STEFANIAK: New South Wales used to have some property taxes down as low as \$100,000, but they have since upped the threshold to about \$300,000.

Mr Hedley: That's correct, Mr Stefaniak.

Mr Wheeler: If you compare where the other states and territories are going, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia have all with their recent budgets announced that they are either decreasing the amount of land tax that they are requiring or increasing their thresholds to reduce the amount of land tax. So, whilst other states and territories are going in one direction, we seem to be going in the other.

THE CHAIR: How is land tax dealt with in regard to the Australian Taxation Office if you are an investor in the ACT?

Mr Hedley: It is deductible.

THE CHAIR: It is a tax deduction.

Mr Hedley: And it is deductible right across the whole of Australia.

MR STEFANIAK: According to a couple of letters to the paper about four months ago—and obviously the budget has changed nothing—several people with properties in the inner south that are obviously underdeveloped, probably the old three-beddies, were getting \$340 to \$350 a week in rent but were paying in government charges \$360 to 370, and that was before mortgage payments were taken into account. Do you hear many stories of that nature?

Mr Hedley: Very similar stories, and the problem that you've got is that the land tax is attributable to the value of the land and if you have got an ex-guvvie in, for example, Griffith, where the UCV might be up at \$400,000 or \$500,000, the land tax hike is so great that there is actually no incentive for people to invest in that sort of housing and the incentive then, and there are social consequences flowing from this, is either to invest in units, where the land component is so much smaller, or, alternatively, housing which is further out in suburbs where the UCV is lower. But it is almost an uneconomic proposition with the current structure of land tax in the territory on residential property to have an investment residential property in the inner south, unless it is a \$1 million or \$2 million house where the improvements are so great and you can let it out to an embassy, and that sort of thing.

MR STEFANIAK: Do you have figures in relation to that? We see the stuff anecdotally in the paper, but do you have such figures?

Mr Hedley: No, we don't have any. We get the anecdotal data, but we haven't got any particular case studies. Mr Blackshaw, the president of the real estate institute, tends to manage more of those properties. Most of our members are involved in commercial properties. I don't know whether the real estate institute will be giving a submission but I am sure the real estate institute, who are more involved in that level of activity, would be able to give you some data on that from their members.

Mr Wheeler: I guess our message is that, on the housing affordability front, the equation which affects affordability is a complex one. The government has announced a suite of new policies which the government is to be applauded about—extra land releases, some concessions for first home buyers for stamp duty and compact housing—but the other important part of the equation is the revenue side. That seems to be a glaring omission from the current policy and that is what we are highlighting.

DR FOSKEY: I would like you to expand on the statement that you made earlier when you suggested that Treasury is a serial offender in underestimating revenue from land sales and development. What's in it for Treasury? Is Treasury just really bad at maths or is there another agenda there?

Mr Hedley: If I can give an example, in last year's budget figures they projected \$157 million in conveyancing duty. Their most up-to-date figure was \$198 million. We think that it will in fact go well over \$200 million by the end of this month. We think there will be a 25 per cent-plus deficit there. If you look at previous history, they always underestimate. As I said, the impact of the underestimate of revenue, mainly from the property sector, has been that the deficit of \$80 million which was projected for this year has been wiped out. If you add to that, Dr Foskey, the underestimate which we believe from the Land Development Agency, we believe that rather than having a surplus of \$100 million in the forthcoming financial year—that is, 2007-08—it could be as high as \$200 million.

DR FOSKEY: But why? Why would a government agency do that?

Mr Wheeler: Can I give you a suggestion as to why?

DR FOSKEY: I am just interested, yes.

Mr Wheeler: Because you need to understand the context of this budget compared to the last budget. Last budget, we were given an image of the territory in crisis. There was significant cutting of expenditure and a huge increase in revenue essentially to balance recurrent need. What we have found in the space of a year is somehow, to everyone's great surprise, that actually wasn't the case. If the government actually had to report that there was a \$200 million surplus, there having been a \$40 million or \$80 million deficit last year, all in the space of a year, then the screws would really be on as to what happened. Obviously you want to have conservative accounting, because you don't want to overestimate your returns, but what we are finding is that there are some real numbers here that need to be challenged as to whether the assumptions, even beyond being conservative, are just grossly not even close.

Mr Hedley: As I said, this document here alone, on page 21, omits totally any reference to press statements and media releases from the Chief Minister about section 63, the QE2 site and the sites in Constitution Avenue, and that is before we go out to Fyshwick and it is before we go out to Tuggeranong, Belconnen, Woden, Hume or Mitchell. Just in the city area alone, we think there is a \$100 million underestimate. I don't know whether it is a deliberate ploy or lack of communication between government departments or what the reason is, but on the one hand you have got the Chief Minister saying section 63 will be released in the 2007-08 financial year. It is 70,000 metres of office space, plus 1,000 car parking spaces.

Their own figures say not 70,000 metres but 4,600. That is a difference—I don't know what that site is going to go for—of \$30 million or \$40 million. For QE2, we understand an arrangement has been made there between the Land Development Agency, the Walker Corporation and the Department of Education, Science and Technology, a closed door deal. We know that there is an offer on the table to buy it for \$25 million from a number of Canberra developers. So the government have said, or their officers have said, it is going to be more than \$25 million by doing this closed door deal. But where is the \$25 million? It is not shown here. The Constitution Avenue site is 30,000 metres. That is worth somewhere between \$15 million and \$20 million. So we think overall there is an underestimate of at least probably \$100 million in revenue just from land sales. That is not counting, as I have

said, what we see as a further underestimate of duty on leases. Each year, Treasury underestimate the amount they get.

I will go on further. Land tax in the next year is going to increase by another 14 per cent; not CPI of three per cent or 3½ per cent but 14 per cent. The general level of rates and land tax are all at rates significantly greater than the consumer price index. In addition, the revenue from last year's introduced fire and emergency services levy increased by six per cent. The utilities tax is more than doubling, from \$7.9 million to \$16.5 million. Additional dividends are being stripped out of Actew. All these things can only be paid for ultimately by consumers paying more for electricity and water. All these things will have to be paid for.

Basically, what we are seeing is additional revenue coming from the property sector to support more spending by government. We think, as I said, the estimate of a surplus of \$100 million-odd which is projected in the current budget will turn, in fact, into a surplus of well in excess of \$200 million, unless the drought comes in and they can't pull the \$70 million out of Actew. But the indications are that it might be breaking. If that is the case, the \$100 million surplus which is projected will become \$200 million.

MR STEFANIAK: We have got about 2½ weeks to go before the end of the financial year, if that. Will there be any money over and above what Treasury forecast as coming in for this financial year?

Mr Hedley: We don't know, but their estimate at the moment is \$198 million in conveyancing duty. As I walked over with Chris, we swapped some stories about some of the large commercial transactions which will be all happening prior to 30 June. It will be interesting to see about the middle of July what the final figure is for the year ended 30 June.

MR STEFANIAK: Do you have an estimate?

Mr Hedley: They originally said \$157 million. They have now said \$198 million. It's not going to be less than that. We think it could be \$210 million or \$220 million. There are significant errors, I think, in the documents.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hedley and Mr Wheeler, we are well over time. I thank you for coming in this afternoon. We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can. Of course, you are most welcome to come back and listen to the hearings as they proceed.

Mr Hedley: Thank you very much.

SEYMOUR, MS ANGELA, Acting Executive Officer, ACT Shelter Inc

THE CHAIR: Ms Seymour, were you here earlier for the reading of the privileges card?

Ms Seymour: No, I was not.

THE CHAIR: All right; I will just read that to you again.

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Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Seymour: Yes, thank you. Firstly, I would like to thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to comment. I am not sure if you all know that ACT Shelter is an independent peak community organisation. We consult, represent and advocate on housing issues on behalf of low to moderate income earners in the ACT.

I would just like to say that we welcome the budget commitment to the affordable housing implementation action plan over the next four years. We trust that this initiative will enable more moderate-income Canberrans to purchase their own homes, thus ensuring a security in their home which is not available to people renting, either in the private market or, now, I must add, in the public sector. We also welcome the government's commitment in the budget to the upgrading of safety in the Narrabundah caravan park, where there are a lot of low-income people residing. However, there are still many Canberrans who at this point in time are living in housing stress, either with mortgages or in private rental. I have just picked up the latest Real Estate Institute of Australia rent and vacancy rate publication, and Canberra has got the highest poor to medium rent in the whole country.

The government has allocated an extra \$4.3 million in the budget for public housing. We understand that this is on top of the \$10 million that is to be put aside per year from last year's budget. In a departmental briefing we were told that the \$4.3 million

would purchase or build a minimum of 17 dwellings. This allows just over \$250,000 per dwelling. There is some doubt in our minds about how this can be achieved with a median house price in the ACT of \$471,900. There I am quoting the Housing Industry Association from the *Canberra Times* on 13 June.

According to the *Property Investor* magazine, Canberra has only one suburb within 20 kilometres of the city with a median price of under \$300,000. That is Charnwood, which only just qualifies on both counts. It and other suburbs with a lower quartile price under \$300,000 are towards the city's outskirts. Transportation costs are therefore a major issue for families that are going to be put out there in public housing.

In relation to building, it has been reported that 37 blocks in Forde were due for sale over the Australian Day weekend. All were sold on the last Friday, so a further eight were offered. The average price was \$200,000. That is for the land; a house cannot be built for \$50,000.

If 17 dwellings are built by Housing ACT for public housing or purchased at this price, and if we add the \$10 million for this year, we should expect an increase of approximately 56 public housing dwellings this year. With the government projected surplus of \$103 million this year we would have hoped that a greater share would go towards helping low income earners in housing stress.

ACT Shelter has noted that budget paper 4 states that the target for public housing properties is 11,545 for 2007-08. That includes 45 that were transferred back from community housing providers. The estimated outcome for 2006-07 is 11,463. That is only an extra 33 properties. There are some figures there that to us do not seem to add up.

The budget papers also report that the revenue for Housing ACT has increased, partly due to an increase in market rents paid by public housing tenants—approximately 15 per cent pay market rent—but with \$1.2 million due to higher tenant-responsible maintenance. As public housing is targeted to those most in need, some tenants will find difficulty in meeting these charges. It is hoped that sufficient support mechanisms remain in place to ensure that assistance can be given to avoid those tenants going into debt.

I turn to the affordable housing task force plan. The affordable housing task force plan intends to expand a pool of properties owned and managed by community housing agencies. An increased loan facility of \$12 million is going to go to Community Housing Canberra. ACT Shelter welcomes the choice of affordable rent models that will be provided in the future. However, our members have expressed ongoing concerns regarding how this initiative will be regulated, as it represents a significant chunk of affordable housing stock which is to be targeted at medium income earners. That is the plan for Community Housing Canberra properties that are going to result from the affordable housing task force plan. This will reduce the available stock overall for low income earners. We understand that this will be part of the work carried out by the affordable housing implementation group in the Chief Minister's Department. As much of this work is to be done by this group, we would be very interested in the detail as it comes out.

We will also be seeking clarification from the department regarding the sale of 500 public housing dwellings mentioned in last year's budget papers. We know that the affordable housing action plan from the task force includes an initiative to examine the sale of 500 public housing properties to tenants on high incomes. We think that these may be those properties, but we do not know. There seem to be no details in the budget papers.

I have one last point. The community sector organisations receiving funding for housing-related services, many of whom are our members, continue to struggle to employ and keep staff. However, we are pleased that the ACT government has continued to provide the funding indexation based on a wage cost index basis, which means 3.75 per cent this year. That is an effort to stop the drain to better-paid and more secure jobs in the ACT and federal public services.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Seymour. Dr Foskey.

DR FOSKEY: Thank you very much, Angela. Last year the budget for Shelter was cut by half, I think.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

DR FOSKEY: I was wondering if you could give us an indication of how that affected the work you were able to do over the year, whether the demand for your services went down by half too, and just how you have coped. And did you get an increase in this year's budget?

Ms Seymour: No, we did not get an increase in this year's budget. Yes, indeed, we did get our funding cut by half. Basically, we have just had to cut the work that we can do by half. We have struggled. We have not been able to employ an executive officer—I am the acting executive officer—because of the uncertainty over that funding. It would only pay for one part-time executive officer and one part-time finance and admin officer. At the moment, I am doing the whole work. I am the only paid employee.

Our committee has rallied round and done a lot voluntary work to assist as far as meeting government officials is concerned. We were allocated a project this year to look at the advice that the government gets from peaks regarding housing issues. We have been able to employ a consultant to do that work. But yes, we have struggled. We have cut out the whole set of forums that we usually would offer, and operate on a part-time basis.

MRS BURKE: I have a supplementary to that. Were you given any reason as to why that funding was cut? I was quite shocked given that you have such a good track for standing up for those most in need.

Ms Seymour: The reason we were given was that the department had been cut last year—

MRS BURKE: But they are still—

Ms Seymour: They had to make savings last year; therefore they had to pass that on.

MRS BURKE: But they still rely heavily on any information you get—or has even that demand for your information and research been pulled back?

Ms Seymour: No. They still see us as the housing peak and expect us to pass on information. They have cut down our contract obligations, from having to produce three submissions to having to produce two submissions this year.

MRS BURKE: But that would not be equivalent to the staff losses, would it?

Ms Seymour: No.

MRS BURKE: So you are doing more—

Ms Seymour: Yes, we were cut by half.

MRS BURKE: and getting a little less from the—

Ms Seymour: And we have been asked to supply one-third less by way of submissions.

MRS BURKE: What would you need to be able to fulfil fully your obligations without being stretched to what you are doing now?

Ms Seymour: We submitted to the government that we would need at least the same as we were getting before; \$130,000 is what we were getting before.

THE CHAIR: Any further questions for Ms Seymour? Ms Porter?

MS PORTER: I have a quick one. I wanted to point to your discussion in your submission around mental health and housing. I thank you for that. I guess you would be very pleased about the step-up, step-down facility that has been funded in the budget.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

MS PORTER: I was wondering if you could explain a little more how you saw that conflict resolution role happening between people who could all be public tenants in the one place or who maybe sometimes could be private owners and public tenants in the same street or something like that.

Ms Seymour: To be honest, Ms Porter, I have not had time to look into that in detail because of the cuts.

MS PORTER: Yes, obviously.

Ms Seymour: I have not looked into that in detail, so I am afraid I cannot give you a full answer on that.

MS PORTER: But you are looking at some kind of a mediation role, conflict resolution service or something like that—something that actually provides a service to help tenants when there is a difference of opinion or some kind of problem between different tenants in a different unit.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

MS PORTER: Or people in a street—say neighbours in a street.

Ms Seymour: Yes. That is, hopefully, how it would have worked, but I have not really had time to look into that in detail, I am afraid.

MS PORTER: But you would be hopeful that the government could look into some kind of models around that?

Ms Seymour: Yes.

MS PORTER: Thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: Ms Seymour, on page 13 of your submission you make a recommendation that policy for security of tenure for public housing tenants be retained. Do you see that as security of tenure within the system of public housing or within individual houses?

Ms Seymour: I am sorry?

THE CHAIR: If you are allocated a government house, do you see security of tenure as having that house for however long you need it?

Ms Seymour: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Or simply within the system of public housing?

Ms Seymour: No. What we see is that, within the whole system, tenants that obtain public housing should get that for as long as they wish—as their home. We see that that property is their home.

THE CHAIR: That individual—

MRS BURKE: Not for the duration of the need?

Ms Seymour: Not for the duration of the need, no.

THE CHAIR: What I am trying to ascertain, though, is this: do you mean that tenants would stay in that particular property for as long as they wished to?

Ms Seymour: Yes.

THE CHAIR: And not move to perhaps a smaller property, because their needs were less, but still be within the government system.

Ms Seymour: Yes. Many tenants will wish to move to something smaller because they do not need it.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Seymour: We see someone's home as their home. A lot of tenants throughout the years, when they have been allocated, have been told, "This is your home for life." Now they have all had letters saying, "Sorry, if you earn over this much we're going to look at evicting you." It doesn't say "evicting"; it says some other wording which I have not got at the top of my head.

THE CHAIR: Assist into more appropriate accommodation.

Ms Seymour: Assisting you, yes.

DR FOSKEY: Can I ask a follow-up to that? I am interested in the kinds of people that have made representations to us on receiving those letters—first of all, indicating that they are rather afraid about complaining because they think that might rush things along a bit more. Can you gain any kind of profile of that group? What I have observed is that we seem to be looking at women a little like myself—who have started off in dire need, get public housing and then have just got to the point where they are able to pay market rent and so on, and they might be able to look at perhaps starting to save to improve their—you know, whatever.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

DR FOSKEY: Their kids may have left home and so on. But it is a particular group that seems to be most—actually, that is the only kind of people who have written to us.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

DR FOSKEY: Is that what you observed?

Ms Seymour: Those are the people that have raised the issue with us as well. A lot of them are those types of people, who have found their feet but only when they are getting towards middle age—and the thought of starting again actually terrifies them.

DR FOSKEY: Yes, it terrifies.

Ms Seymour: Plus the fact that they are in their community—they have the support of community; they have friends. The government is keen on keeping communities; it would be a huge disruption for those families. And there is whether they would actually be able to afford it now. Let us face it: with the cost of housing, at the age of 45 or 50 are they going to be able to afford to get a mortgage to purchase something? There may be a few, but I think there would be very few. Plus the department has told us that this will not come into effect for a couple of years.

MRS BURKE: Two or three years, I understand.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

MRS BURKE: They are talking about incomes over \$80,000—joint incomes.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

MRS BURKE: I think the letter has caused a lot of distress.

Ms Seymour: Yes.

MRS BURKE: In terms of not clearly outlining it to people with high and special needs, people in the category you are talking about, people with primary carers living with them where the annual income exceeds \$80,000. There is a lot to work through. The government need to cross the t's and dot the i's. They have put a lot of fear into the community, unnecessarily, unfortunately, by perhaps missing out the key thing.

THE CHAIR: Is there a question in here somewhere?

MRS BURKE: I am just agreeing. It is an issue. We need to know the volume of people. From your feedback—you are probably not going to be able to tell us that today—what sort of percentage of your client base is actually calling you? What number would you put on that? Is it a high volume of people?

Ms Seymour: We do not have the direct clients; we just get feedback from our members.

MRS BURKE: Sorry, the feedback. Has it been one, two, 22, 1,000?

Ms Seymour: It would not be that many.

MRS BURKE: No.

Ms Seymour: But it is still—

MRS BURKE: Enough.

Ms Seymour: Enough. Housing ACT is working on the fine detail on that; they did say that they are going to consult on those measures.

MRS BURKE: It is a bit late; they have sent the letter out already.

DR FOSKEY: Yes.

Ms Seymour: We would have hoped it would be the other way around.

MRS BURKE: I know.

Ms Seymour: That they consulted first and then came up with a policy. But it seems to have been done the other way round.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming in this afternoon.

MRS BURKE: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can, as well as any questions on notice.

Ms Seymour: Thank you for your time.

MRS BURKE: Thank you for coming.

CRESSWELL, MS ARA, Director, ACT Council of Social Service
PHILLIPS, MS JACQUELINE, Policy Officer, ACT Council of Social Service
REYNDERS, MR LLEWELLYN, Manager, Policy and Communications, ACT Council of Social Service

THE CHAIR: We now have ACTCOSS in front of the committee. Ms Cresswell and Mr Reynders, were you here when I read the privileges card out earlier?

Ms Cresswell: Yes.

Mr Reynders: We were.

THE CHAIR: So you understand that.

Mr Reynders: That is correct.

THE CHAIR: That is great. We are a little bit into your time, but there is some time available so we can give you the full 20 minutes. Would you like to begin with an opening presentation?

Ms Cresswell: Thank you. All three of us will speak. We will all have something to say; we will probably speak for about 10 minutes.

MS PORTER: Each or separately?

Mr Reynders: Altogether.

MS PORTER: Altogether.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Ms Cresswell: I will speak, Llewellyn will speak, and Jacqueline will speak.

MS PORTER: For 10 minutes total?

Ms Cresswell: No, all up.

MS PORTER: Altogether, yes. I am just trying to clarify what you said.

Ms Cresswell: Llewellyn will be speaking about housing but before we start I want to answer the question that Dr Foskey asked Angela Seymour. That was about people who were contacting Shelter. ACTCOSS has had a number of people contacting us, and it is about the overallocation—where they have been told they will lose their housing because they have too many bedrooms. Those people are older couples whose children have grown up, whose grandchildren visit regularly, who have put money into doing up the backyard, who have put money into making a cover for the caravan, who have put money into painting and carpeting and making their homes beautiful. Those are the people—who would normally never ring us—that we are getting telephone calls from: people who are acutely distressed that they will now be asked to move to a much smaller property because their children have left and they have an

overallocation of rooms.

MRS BURKE: They are two different things: the income assessment and the rooms.

Ms Cresswell: Yes, but it is part of that same thing.

MRS BURKE: Yes, I realise that. Thank you.

Ms Cresswell: In relation to the budget, there are a number of initiatives there that we welcome. We are very pleased to see some money going back into the community sector. However, there are a whole lot of areas that have received either no additional funding or insignificant funding. A particular one that we would point out is the supported accommodation assistance program. It was the program that was drastically cut last year. The effect was immediately felt. We know that we are turning away three out of every four adults who knock on the door looking for assistance, yet it was cut and no money went back into it. So we are concerned about what is happening out there in the Canberra community sector, which is the sector that deals with Canberra's most vulnerable citizens.

I will just briefly mention—and I can only briefly mention—the money around indigenous issues. It was bitterly disappointing to us to see that there was very little in that area. We know that the indigenous people in the ACT are disadvantaged in many areas, so we were concerned that there were no measures to improve things like educational outcomes or the high numbers of indigenous people who are involved in the criminal justice system. We were really concerned about it. There was this \$20,000 that is projected funding for public service traineeships. We would like to know how that will work—it seems a very small amount of money to develop traineeships—and how it will achieve its outcomes. That was one that we were left feeling a bit sad about; we think that a lot more could have been done there. When we have a \$103 million surplus, it would to be good to be able to tackle the big issues in Canberra.

Of course, the big issue—and I mention it regularly, probably to each of you—is the very viability of the community sector. We are concerned that the sector that deals with Canberra's most vulnerable citizens is under so much strain. We are worrying about what will happen. We have lost services. We are worried that we will continue to lose those services.

Whilst money has gone in—the government has heard the call for meeting some of the unmet need—nothing went into the budget that looked at doing anything towards the community sector task force report. The community sector task force came out of promises made by the Chief Minister at the ACTCOSS conference in August 2004. The community sector task force met in 2005; a report was finalised in 2005 and released in May 2006. The recommendations have been with the government for a year, and, sadly, there is no action whatsoever on that.

We are really concerned, particularly, about wages and conditions in the community sector. We cannot compete with the big employers here—the commonwealth public sector. We are losing an enormous level of skill and we have a serious skill shortage in the sector. We cannot afford to have people who are unskilled working with very

vulnerable people; we need to address it as a matter of urgency.

We know that there is a bit of extra money going to the skills commission to investigate the skills shortages. We have been told that that group will examine community sector workforce issues, but there is no community representative on it. I know of no community organisation that has been approached for its views. So we have yet to see the proof that in fact it will deal with community sector shortages.

I am conscious that I have used up my three minutes; I was talking as fast as I can. I will pass it over to Mr Reynders.

Mr Reynders: I want to just touch on a few points, probably picking up a little bit from Angela on housing and homelessness services, and redirecting Ara's points about the supported accommodation program and its continuing need and about the continuing fallout in that sector from the cuts that were made last year. It does seem—particularly from those services' perspectives—that to have a \$103 million surplus projected and to cut \$1 million out of a program is a very odd way to achieve that.

We again welcome the injection for public housing. My understanding is that Housing ACT will achieve its 17 dwellings through purchasing compact blocks and—using a contractor or themselves—building small, compact houses on those compact blocks in new suburbs. That will be interesting in itself, as new suburbs tend to have very few facilities in them and often do not have transport connections immediately. If that is the case, we are slightly concerned about the placement of people who are often very vulnerable in areas which have virtually no services or transport. We also welcome the affordable housing initiatives, but again they are going to take some time to come into place. In the meantime we are still seeing pressure on homelessness services—rents and those issues that we continue to iterate.

The third area of housing I would like to pick up is community housing. The government have made a commitment to one form of community housing and one organisation in their affordable housing strategy. But at the same time—Angela mentioned this as well—they are actually pulling properties out of the community housing sector, basically because they have changed the pricing system in the community housing sector. Services say that they simply cannot do that—shutting down and giving their properties back—because it is completely unviable. On the one hand, the government is saying, “We are transferring properties. The title and this debt model will be set up in one organisation.” On the other hand, all the other organisations are basically in the process of shutting themselves down because they cannot operate.

A second area I want to briefly comment on is this. As I think the property council mentioned, we are seeing the pass through of the network facilities tax into water and electricity; we are seeing electricity rises in terms of the drought. We are concerned that the concession program that the ACT government operates is not going to keep pace with those price rises in utilities, particularly for the very vulnerable people who are entitled to those concessions. That will see people who are on fixed incomes, say statutory incomes, losing more and more of their very meagre resources in paying utility costs, because the concession program will not be able to compensate for the rises.

Finally, I want to mention a couple of quite small revenue measures in the budget that, from what we see, look a bit regressive. One is this very interesting idea of putting a fee on a fine, in order to pay victim support costs. Obviously, victim support is a very essential service and one that we support. However, we have concerns about hypothecating revenue in that form, particularly as it is a flat fee and because people who pay fines in general tend to be on lower incomes to start with. Secondly, there is a projected change—which I understand is revenue neutral—in the rates system, which is about getting rid of the tax-free threshold in the rates system. We are concerned that this is going to make the rates system more regressive, because they intend to retain the block component but have no tax-free threshold.

Ms Phillips: I want to make a few brief comments in relation to health, mental health and disability. Firstly, I will go to health. We should firstly say that we welcome a number of positive initiatives in this budget, particularly in relation to public hospitals, youth health services and chronic disease initiatives. But we are concerned about the general weight of that funding going to the acute end of the health spectrum and services, and not into promotion or prevention and community-based health services, which of course can lower the costs down the line.

We also have some specific concerns about the injection of funding to dental care. On its face, that seemed a welcome injection, but on closer examination it appears that the funding is merely going to bring back the current mean waiting time to what it was targeted to be, which was 12 months, when it is in fact now 16 months, with a projected target still at 12 months for 2007-08. So it does not seem as though there is going to be any improvement beyond that 2006-07 target, and waiting times will remain unacceptably long.

In the area of mental health, again we welcome the allocation of significant funding to the mental health system. We are particularly pleased to see funding for the step-up, step-down facility which you mentioned earlier. Our question in relation to that concerns what model is going to be used. What proportion of funding in these mental health service allocations, particularly in relation to step-up, step-down, will go to community services and what will go to government services? Will it be a government-run facility or a jointly run facility, as I understand is the model in Victoria, or will it be community run? We have some questions about that. We also want to see some guarantees that, as the mental health service enhancements go forward, the community sector and consumers will be actively involved in the consultation processes around that.

On the issue of disability, again the \$15.8 million funding allocation over four years was excellent to see. We had some concerns that the forecast need over that projected time period remains static rather than increasing with an increase in the territory population. Again, there are questions about what proportion of funding will be going to community services. It sounds as though it is going to be community based—at least, that is the language that gets used in the budget—but we are awaiting the specifics of that. Finally, we also note that there were several key initiatives in the disability area—like the increase in accessible buses and facilities for non-government schools—which are short-term measures with decreasing funding in the outyears. So we have some questions about ongoing commitments to disability access.

They are my brief comments.

Mr Reynders: Can I also point out that we provided the committee secretary with some copies of our budget snapshot that we prepared for the budget forum last week. There is a more detailed commentary on some of these issues in that.

MRS BURKE: This is an excellent document, and thank you for doing it.

Mr Reynders: Thank you.

MRS BURKE: It is really easy reading.

Ms Cresswell: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: Mr Reynders, could you just clarify what you said about fines. You said that you felt that it was regressive because you felt that the majority of people who would be paying these fines would be low income earners. I just wanted to know what you based that on. I also point out, obviously, that you do not have to speed—that is one of the fines, I believe. People would imagine that is one. Would you see those as regressive—charges on a speeding fine?

Mr Reynders: I guess there are a number of—

MS PORTER: Because not everyone that owned a car or some form of transport would necessarily be a low income earner. I was just trying to unpick that a bit.

Mr Reynders: There are a number of parts to that question. First, it is a flat fine, so it does not move in proportion to the fine: someone who pays a high fine pays the same as someone who pays a low fine.

MS PORTER: Yes, okay.

Mr Reynders: Secondly, there is the issue that fines themselves are regressive because they are the same whether you are rich or poor.

MS PORTER: Yes, okay.

Mr Reynders: So you are paying a higher proportion of your income in fines if you are on a low income than if you are a high income earner.

MR STEFANIAK: Not if you go to court.

Mr Reynders: Sorry?

MR STEFANIAK: Not necessarily if you go to court, though.

Mr Reynders: That is our understanding, and certainly access to justice is a particular

issue for low income people, who tend not to take these things to court.

MS PORTER: Yes, exactly.

Mr Reynders: Thirdly, it is my understanding that in general people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system or in the fines system.

MS PORTER: Yes.

Mr Reynders: Those sorts of issues.

MS PORTER: Yes, thank you.

Mr Reynders: That was the direction we were coming from.

MS PORTER: Thanks for clarifying that.

THE CHAIR: Mrs Burke.

MRS BURKE: For the sake of *Hansard*, let me say that the SAAP funding we talked about is the supported accommodation assistance program. Going back to that, Ms Cresswell, are you saying that we are turning three to four adults away or three out of four?

Ms Cresswell: Three out of four.

MRS BURKE: Three out of four. Where are those people going, and what is it going to take to bring the system back up? The change to eligibility criteria for public housing has also impacted further upon you, if I may say that—at the wrong end of the scale, I would have to say. What is your view on that?

Ms Cresswell: I cannot answer as to where they are going. I have no idea where many of those people are going. We hear the stories about where they are going.

MRS BURKE: Where do you send them?

Ms Cresswell: A lot of them are doing the rounds. We hear about women going back to unsafe and violent situations.

MRS BURKE: Yes.

Ms Cresswell: We hear about children being put in unsafe situations. I personally have seen women come down off the mountain on cold winter nights. I have seen women and children sleeping in public toilets. We hear the stories, but we cannot tell you absolutely where they are going. We do think that the transitional housing program that has been developed—that is an initiative of Housing ACT, and we are very happy to see that—might change the situation, but the reality has been that there has been a bottleneck within the supported accommodation assistance program because there have not been any exit points from the services.

MRS BURKE: That is right.

Ms Cresswell: So people are going to a crisis accommodation service. It should be for three weeks or so, but they are ending up there for nine months, 10 months or longer. Those are the issues that are being worked on. We hope that when we get the next lot of data we will see that there has been a shift, but the reality is that in a jurisdiction as wealthy as the ACT we should not have anybody sleeping in public toilets.

THE CHAIR: Dr Foskey, and then Mr Stefaniak.

DR FOSKEY: One of the things that you referred to in your budget—I know that ACTCOSS, along with other organisations, put a lot of work into it—is the community sector task force report. What was the glitch in the system? Were the consultation and involvement in the community sector appropriate? Do you think the report's recommendations are good? What is the thing that needs to be done right now in this budget year?

Ms Cresswell: I am not sure that the sector has been broadly consulted since the report was published. I think the report was published on a website; it did not ever come out in hard copy. And it has not gone further than that since the report was released. There is no question that it needs resourcing. Some of the items or recommendations in there are low cost; they will not cost a lot of money. But we need to start working on some of them so that the community sector sees that there is some good faith there—so that the community sector begins to feel as though it is being valued or validated for the work that it does. We need to look at that report and work out which bits we could do now.

DR FOSKEY: So consultation might come in again at that point of looking at the recommendations and deciding a staged—

Ms Cresswell: Certainly, prior to the release of the report, some consultations were held with community sector organisations, but I know of none since the report was actually published.

MS PORTER: And you see none of the recommendations being picked up at all?

Mr Reynders: There has been no government response officially.

MS PORTER: Sorry, that was not my question. My question was: whether they have made a formal response or not, have any of the recommendations been picked up in this budget at all?

Ms Cresswell: No, not that I have seen in this budget at all. But I think we do require a strong government response.

MS PORTER: Yes; you are looking for a response—a formal response.

THE CHAIR: Bill.

MR STEFANIAK: Thanks. I have a couple of quick questions. The first is in relation to the extra money going to victims of crime, which is probably the \$10 levy. You have got down that it is producing lists for counselling services. As far as you are aware, is any of that going to the Victims of Crime Assistance League, who do a very good job for victims of crime?

My second question relates to transport. You rightly highlight some huge problems—the cuts that the previous budget made to public transport, especially in the outer suburbs and especially to people who desperately need, and have no other form of, transport. You say that the budget is a start to rebuilding a system but that there is a long way to go. Have you got any specific areas where the government needs to address additional bus services? Are there any areas of real concern to your clients where the service is just so bad that they have really been affected over the last 12 to 18 months by the cuts to the bus service which the government has to address?

Ms Cresswell: Do you want to take the transport?

Mr Reynders: On the victims of crime issue, I do not have that detail.

MR STEFANIAK: Okay.

Mr Reynders: On the transport issue, I am aware that, through both the Assembly consultation process and ACTION's complaint process, various people continually report difficulties with particular services. Our perspective has always been more general—particularly concerning the central-outer Canberra divide in terms of transport services. It is interesting that throughout the country the best public transport is often in the areas where the most well-off people live. As people have told me, the trains on the North Shore always run on time. I think we see a similar thing in Canberra: the people who could use public transport the most and whom it would benefit most are often not the ones receiving the most frequent or well located services.

THE CHAIR: Any more questions?

MR STEFANIAK: Mrs Dunne might like to ask a few on education. I see that you have problems in relation to a lack of school counsellors, and nothing has been done in relation to that. And there are also some concerns regarding the school closures—and there has been no review of the impact of those closures on students' families and community wellbeing. Perhaps you might like to comment on that. That is an ongoing issue that is concerning the community.

Ms Cresswell: Certainly it is an ongoing issue. It is an issue we are particularly concerned about. Our emphasis always is upon low-income and disadvantaged people. We want to know, particularly with the closure of schools, that low-income and disadvantaged people are not really struggling with that. It is the same with the counsellors: we need to know that there is support there for people who are struggling with support—trying to get support now. We know that families are doing it tough. We know that ordinary working families are having trouble putting shoes on the feet of their children to go to school. We know that they are having trouble filling their lunch boxes. We know that rental prices are high, petrol prices are high, and

electricity prices are rising. We know that families are doing it tough; we need to know that there is support there for them.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming in to the estimates committee. We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can. If there are any questions on notice that members put to you, we would like a response within five working days.

Ms Cresswell: Thank you.

Mr Reynders: Thanks a lot.

GARRATT, MR DAVID, Executive Representative, Association of Independent Schools of the ACT

IRVINE, MR JEREMY, Executive Director, Association of Independent Schools of the ACT

THE CHAIR: Our next witnesses are Mr Jeremy Irvine and Mr David Garratt from the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT. Gentlemen, were you here earlier when I read out the privileges card?

Mr Irvine: We weren't, chair, no.

THE CHAIR: Okay, I will read it again. The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and rebroadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules contained in the resolution agreed by the Assembly on 7 March 2002 concerning the broadcasting of Assembly and committee proceedings. Before the committee commences taking evidence, let me place on record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee in evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attach to parliament, its members and others, necessary to the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, if the committee accedes to such a request, the committee will take evidence in camera and record that evidence. Should the committee take evidence in this manner, I remind the committee and those present that it is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of the evidence to the Assembly. I should add that any decision regarding publication of in camera evidence or confidential submissions will not be taken by the committee without prior reference to the person whose evidence the committee may consider publishing.

Again, gentlemen, welcome to the estimates committee for 2007. Would you like to make an opening statement? I note that we don't have a submission from you as yet.

Mr Irvine: No. If we could start, chair, with me. Thank you very much, members of the committee, for having us here today. I am Jeremy Irvine. I am the Executive Director of the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT. My colleague here is Mr David Garratt, who, I am sure, is known to many of you. David is the principal of Daramalan college and is also a member of the government's Non-Government Schools Education Council. We are here today on behalf of over 11,500 young people who go to the 17 schools in Canberra that our association represents. We are here today on behalf of them, their families and their school communities.

I am sure we would all agree that Canberra is renowned, quite rightly, as a great place to send your kids to school. We are a unique place, a unique community, and we have a unique schooling demographic which has the highest per capita levels of non-government student enrolments in the country. We are here today because, as my father likes to say, you get what you are given or you go without. We do believe this budget does not recognise that uniqueness. It does not recognise that the costs to provide education in Canberra are more than the ACT government level of indexation, and it does not recognise the simple market reality that Canberra parents want choice

in education.

At the outset, it is important for us to state very clearly on the record that we believe that any increase—any increase—in education funding is good. Our commitment in the independent sector does not stop at our own school gates. We are part of the wider ACT education sector and we work well with government and the Catholic Education Office on a range of issues. Our view is that the recent announcements on government increases to school funding are welcome. Of course, we are not here today, given the time, to debate the relative merits of different funding models, or even to debate the issues of funding itself. I suspect some matters could take a considerable amount of time.

In the association's view, what is missing from this budget is recognition of what 2.75 per cent indexation means to educating kids in our schools. In a moment I will ask David to expand on that and talk to you about some of his specific concerns. Independent schools in the ACT are diverse and they include Anglican, Christian, Catholic, Islamic, Seventh Day Adventist, Montessori and Steiner schools. One in five Canberra students goes to an independent school, and combined the non-government sector—that is, the independent and the Catholic schools—comprise over 40 per cent of school enrolments in the ACT, which, as I said, is more than anywhere else in the country.

Over the last decade, full-time enrolments in the independent sector have grown nearly 40 per cent—over six per cent for Catholic schools, which also includes the three Catholic schools under our umbrella—while full-time enrolments have dropped over 12 per cent for government schools. We support individual choice of schooling, diversity of schooling options, and are committed to partnerships between schools, parents and governments. However, the simple fact is that independent schools operate because parents decide to send their children to our schools. If people didn't want to, our schools would not exist. Clearly, Canberrans are choosing. They want choice within government schools, they want to be able to choose between government and non-government schools, and in the non-government sector parents want diversity. Our association represents everyone from Christian to Islamic, Steiner to Montessori.

Parents want and should get a fair partnership between their children's school and government. The association wrote to Minister Barr in October last year asking that consideration be given to three things, the first of which was providing support for independent school teachers so that they can undertake professional development in the introduction of the new curriculum. Secondly, we asked the ACT government to consider increasing funding for students with disabilities across the entire education sector. Finally, we sought a conversation on capital support for our schools.

Towards 2020 proudly boasts the phrase “choice, diversity, opportunity” and it's a nice phrase. We would argue that Canberra parents deserve the opportunity to send their children to the school they want to, that there should be diversity in those schools and that there should be choice for parents to send their children to the school that best meets their children's needs. I will now hand over to David to make some comments on the budget from his perspective.

Mr Garratt: Thanks, chair, for the opportunity to add these comments from, I guess, grounds of practicality because I am talking from one school's perspective, but it's a fairly typical school. I was press-ganged into accompanying Jeremy earlier this week and I apologise for not having the submission to you beforehand.

The matter of most serious concern to us all is the failure of the present ACT government to provide funding which keeps pace with the increasing costs of education. At my school, salaries account for just over 75 per cent of the total annual budget, and that would be typical for most of the Catholic and independent schools, I'm sure. This year and for the next three years salaries will increase by four per cent a year at our school. That has been factored into a new agreement. In some ACT independent schools under different agreements, I know that that increase will be greater over the next couple of years.

The ACT government component of funding has failed year after year to keep up with salary increases. In a year when salaries alone will rise by four per cent, the ACT contribution to the total revenue will rise by only 2.75 per cent. A paper emanating from the Catholic Education Office in early 2007 reported that the ACT education costs index increased by 6.4 per cent over the previous 12 months. There is obviously a shortfall, and a serious one, in funding from the ACT government. I have attached a graph which is based on actual figures from my own school and you can see the trend lines. I'm sorry, Vicki, you didn't get one.

Mrs Dunne: That's all right.

THE CHAIR: I remind members that the committee has not authorised this submission for publication yet. We will try to do that in the private meeting.

Mr Garratt: Hence my apology at the start. I read in the procedural rulings only last night that it was supposed to be with you beforehand.

DR FOSKEY: That's fine.

Mr Irvine: We try to stick to the rules.

Mr Garratt: Note in the figures chart that over the period 1999 to 2007 school fees have increased 100 per cent. That is in the page which maps the school fees from 1999 to 2007, alongside commonwealth grants for the same period and state or ACT grants for the same period, and the increases along the bottom: 100 per cent for school fees, only 31 per cent for the ACT and double that from the commonwealth. It is the parents, and this is the one point I want to have you hear from me, who are bearing the burden of the funding shortfall via annual fee increases across the ACT of the order of eight per cent a year since I've been principal. One year at our place it was 12. To me, this is effectively a hidden additional tax on those who choose non-government education. These parents are being expected to contribute more and more to the cost of school education in the ACT.

The word missing from the *Towards 2020* catchphrase is clearly "equity". So, on behalf of my fellow educators, I want to record my deep disappointment with the way independent schools have again been treated in the ACT budget. We could go further

into a discussion of unfulfilled promises made prior to the 2004 election, but we haven't got all day.

MR STEFANIAK: You can if you like. I note that for the first three years the fees and the state grants go up by about the same amount. The commonwealth grants go up by about 20 per cent and the state grants go up by about 12, as do your fees, and then there is the huge disparity of about a 80 per cent increase in the fees, where you had to do with 40 per cent from commonwealth grants and over 18 per cent from state grants. You are actually going backwards in real terms in your state grants.

My only other question—I know Mrs Dunne would like to ask it of you—is about the interest subsidy scheme. Is the fact that it has been cancelled having an effect also on your sector?

Mr Garratt: It certainly is on the schools that are developing. Fortunately, we were one of the last two schools to get an interest subsidy on a big project, so we are really pleased that we did. Just speaking as an individual school, we have got a \$4 million expenditure about to happen over the next 12 months, an additional \$4million, and there won't be any support for that obviously because the interest subsidy scheme doesn't exist. And we have gone backwards in real terms. I think the graphs show that.

Mrs Dunne: Mr Garratt, I would like you to elaborate briefly, if you could, on the unfulfilled promises from the last election.

Mr Garratt: Right. I can't tick them off.

Mr Irvine: I can.

Mr Garratt: The prime one for me would be special education, the special needs students, learning support students as they are called in other places. Students with special needs in independent schools are funded at something like half of what they are funded in government schools, yet we have to provide the same sorts of services to them.

Mrs Dunne: My understanding is that the rhetoric at the time of the introduction of the SCAN process, where everyone was given a SCAN assessment, was that the funding would be substantially the same irrespective of what sort of school the child went to. What sort of impact is the failure to deliver that level of funding having on, say, your school?

Mr Garratt: The only students that we are able to provide proper support for are those who are getting specific funding as a result of the SCAN process. So in a class of, say, 15 to 18 in special needs in each year in years 7 to 10 there may be three or four students who are getting SCAN-related funding and the others get nothing.

THE CHAIR: Mr Garratt, for the *Hansard* record, would you remind us what SCAN means.

Mr Garratt: Student-centred appraisal of needs. It's a consultative process, a very good one, and it's one that has worked with government and non-government schools

quite successfully.

Mrs Dunne: Are you experiencing that the children that you put forward to go through the SCAN process are getting assessed that they need X level of funding, but there isn't that much funding, so that they are actually getting something less than X level of funding, or is there a different process for children in non-government schools?

Mr Garratt: There are levels of funding according to the category that they have fallen under in the SCAN process, and that works. That allows us to have special needs assistants and a literacy coordinator.

Mrs Dunne: Those are recurrent costs in terms of giving you money for staff, materials and stuff like that?

Mr Garratt: Staff basically. It doesn't cover the staff, so the schools kick in extra to have learning support assistants, a literacy coordinator and another teacher who is just on additional learning support activity. We invest a lot in it and we recoup nowhere near the money.

Mrs Dunne: Are you conscious that there are families whose children essentially are not turned away from the school but eventually make the decision that they cannot remain there because the level of support is not available?

Mr Garratt: I don't think so. No, I think they appreciate what they get. The problem occurs and is about to occur for me in counselling parents who would like to stay at the school but we don't offer special needs support in year 11. We have to advise them to do a program such as the one at Dickson college, which has a special program.

Mrs Dunne: So that that is the hard end. Are there certain areas of disability that you cannot cope with? How do you cope with or cater for, say, children with autism spectrum disorder?

Mr Garratt: There are some. Asperger's syndrome is a part of that and there are several Asperger's children. I should just correct what I said before. A couple of students who have had funding have gone through to year 12. One of those finished last year successfully. He was an Asperger's boy, quite serious. So he had support through 11 and 12, but only because he was attracting his own funding as a SCAN 1. There is another one in year 11.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time, unfortunately. Thank you very much for coming in this afternoon. We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can. If there are any questions on notice, we would like the answers to those back within five working days.

SWEANEY, MR BENJAMIN, Official, Transport Workers Union

THE CHAIR: The next witness we have is Mr Ben Sweaney from the Transport Workers Union. Mr Sweaney, were you here earlier when I read out the privileges card?

Mr Sweaney: I was, thank you, chair.

THE CHAIR: Do you understand its implications?

Mr Sweaney: Indeed.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement? I note we haven't got a submission from you.

Mr Sweaney: No submission. I will be very brief. As far as the areas of transportation are concerned, the TWU considers the budget to be moving in the right direction, especially in providing for the ACT Ambulance Service an additional 16 crew. The additional \$4.9 million over the next three years is a fantastic move in the right direction. As far as ACTION is concerned, there are obviously a few concerns there about the amount of money that is being put back into the service, given what was taken out last year. Again, it is a move in the right direction by the Stanhope government and we have nothing more but room to move towards an even better one next year, hopefully.

THE CHAIR: In regard to your members who work for ACTION, which areas within ACTION do you think the government has or has not addressed in this year's budget?

Mr Sweaney: There needs to be a move towards public awareness as far as timetables go. At the moment, obviously, ACTION drivers are bearing the brunt of the community's disquiet at the changes in the timetables. As for the \$1.24 million going back in, with \$4 million last year, that is obviously an area of concern for our members.

MRS BURKE: You mentioned the new and very much welcomed additions to the ambulance fleet. Would you or your members have concerns about the ageing of some of the fleet?

Mr Sweaney: There were 16 staff put on. An extra four would have meant there would be the ability—

MRS BURKE: Sorry, ageing of the vehicles, not people.

Mr Sweaney: At this stage, I believe the fleet is one of the best across the nation and the addition of the bariatric truck which has been provided by the government will bring them into line with other jurisdictions.

MRS BURKE: What about general ambulances? I believe that the ones that have been introduced are good and welcome, but they are specialist. What about general

ones?

Mr Sweaney: Generally, there are problems. Mercedes as a whole make a great ambulance, but there are problems. But they do have an inclusive program to get paramedics on side to design better trucks for the future. But that's more of an issue with Mercedes, I'm afraid.

MS PORTER: Sorry, with what?

Mr Sweaney: The actual design of the ambulances. That is probably the only complaint across the board. Once you get into the back of an ambulance, if you are performing what they call a 12-lead ECG on patients, which is just a cardio read, there are spatial areas that can make it difficult.

MRS BURKE: We hear there have been some mechanical problems. Would that be true, such as brakes, which are very important when you are doing cardiac stuff?

Mr Sweaney: They can be very important, brakes. Again, that would be a manufacturing issue, and I believe Mercedes do consult with services throughout Australia to provide the best generation of paramedic vehicles.

MRS BURKE: So you wouldn't say our fleet is ageing.

Mr Sweaney: I wouldn't say it's ageing, no.

MR STEFANIAK: I have heard that there have been some problems and, unfortunately, a few drivers have been assaulted at bus interchanges. How is that going? I understand that usually there is only one person on duty at a bus interchange and there are safety issues there. Occasionally that person might be called away if, say, a bus has broken down, so there is no one there. Is anything moving in relation to that in terms of ensuring that bus drivers are actually protected from louts who might assault them at interchanges, just those occupational health and safety concerns in relation to staff at the interchanges, especially Woden, due to some of the violence we are seeing there?

Mr Sweaney: Obviously it is a major concern when anyone faces a threat of assault. It would be nice to say that WorkCover have taken a more active role in providing assistance and coverage, but they have been slow to come to the game. But the minister had made provisions to ensure that they will have adequate consultation with Woden, in particular, to cover the area, but it is a concern for all members.

MR STEFANIAK: We have heard from ACTCOSS, and one of their concerns is in relation to real problems with the cuts last year and the timetable the government came up with, which has caused a lot of concern in terms of people being able to get to work, especially people in the outlying suburbs, many of whom depend on buses and are just finding it almost impossible to utilise buses to go to appointments and things. Have you had any input there?

I think the government has put a fairly small amount back in, about \$1.25 million, for additional bus services. Have you had any input there and are you satisfied with the

improvements there, or are there still big gaps in those services which are causing lots of concern to consumers? I understand that they have taken that out on drivers in the past.

Mr Sweaney: Probably the biggest concern for members across the board is the frustration of the community and how it is vented at drivers on a day-to-day basis. Obviously there are problems with the timetable. I think the government has even acknowledged that and will be working towards providing a better transport timetable for the residents of the territory, but the biggest concern is with the drivers bearing the brunt of community frustration.

MR STEFANIAK: Is that still happening?

Mr Sweaney: Across the board, yes.

MR STEFANIAK: Have you had discussions with the government? Have you suggested what they should do in terms of proper timetabling to ensure that customers do get a fair go?

Mr Sweaney: The government has been receptive so far in listening to the concerns of the members and providing general awareness to the consumers that use ACTION.

MR STEFANIAK: Has there been any feedback, though? Have you been told of any new services being put on to alleviate some of these problems?

Mr Sweaney: I couldn't answer that one, sorry, Mr Stefaniak. I am not across that one.

DR FOSKEY: I am interested to know whether the Transport Workers Union believes that bus drivers themselves are being consulted. First of all, whether they were consulted before the changes introduced by last year's budget and, secondly, whether they are being actively involved in changes now and whether they feel they are being listened to.

Mr Sweaney: Yes, ACT bus drivers have received a fairly warm reception from the minister and been involved in the process to a certain degree. Obviously they would like more consultation and to have a greater involvement in the move forward. That is something that the government, hopefully, will provide, especially with the plans for the future, but at the moment they do feel that they have received a good reception so far. But there is always room to move towards a better outcome.

DR FOSKEY: Does that statement apply to prior to the budget cuts or just since there has been a bit of public fuss?

Mr Sweaney: Probably since the changes in the timetables, so that would be—

DR FOSKEY: So it has been relatively recent.

Mr Sweaney: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I know that you are going through or looking at a possible reclassification of paramedics in ACTAS. Has there been any allocation of funding for that in this budget?

Mr Sweaney: There hasn't been any provision so far. We are still in negotiations, as you may be aware, on moving ACT ambulance paramedics from a technical officer stream to a professional officer stream. That is part of their current EBA negotiations or certified agreement negotiations. Obviously ACTAS are working with us to look into savings for the government that already exist.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to highlight some of those for us?

Mr Sweaney: The ACT paramedics have the highest transport-not-required rate, which is 30 per cent of patients that ACT paramedics go to. We are incredibly privileged in the territory. There is a national shortage of intensive care paramedics and we are assured of one at the end of very 000 call that we place in the ACT, which makes us, as I said, incredibly privileged. That level of skill and the ability to provide novel and complex work alleviate an enormous amount of stress on the health system. Thirty per cent of patients, as you can imagine, on top of an Australian health system would blow out at a tremendous cost to health as far as nurses, doctors and hospital running go. That is one saving that the ACT ambulance paramedics provide in alleviating that huge stress on an already choked up system.

There are other ones. As I mentioned earlier, ACT paramedics are able to perform 12-lead ECGs. The only other people who can, apart from doctors, are cardiologists. So, if a person were to suffer a heart attack close to Calvary, with the ability to read a 12-lead ECG you can transfer them straight to the cardio lab in TCH, which means you are saving Calvary Hospital, on average, about \$7,000 a bed. So there are huge savings that paramedics are already providing to the system.

THE CHAIR: Have you done a comparison between other states and their ambulance officers?

Mr Sweaney: We have as far as the skill level goes. It is very difficult to get a dollar value because very few records are kept. I can't speak on behalf of ACTAS, but they are looking at introducing a system where we can provide greater statistics to the government to show the actual benefits that we contribute to the territory and the health system as a whole. As far as skill level goes, this is the most highly skilled ambulance service and set of ambulance officers across any jurisdiction, which is fantastic, and the service has always been proud to boast that. What we are trying to do is to obtain recognition of that level of complex skill by moving them out of what is essentially a data entry provision to a health professional stream where they belong.

MRS BURKE: I go back to the ACTION bus drivers' situation, which is something that you hear about on talkback radio and in the community a fair bit, and you have acknowledged that. Do you believe enough is being done to alleviate the situation and relieve the pressure and stress on drivers? What is the morale of drivers like at this time?

Mr Sweaney: There is always more that can be done. There is a push towards a

satisfactory outcome, but there is always room to do more.

MRS BURKE: In terms of time, is it being expedited to your satisfaction and to your members' satisfaction?

Mr Sweaney: I guess by answering the second part of the question it ties up the first. Morale is quite good at the moment. It was at a very low point. A couple of months ago there was genuine concern amongst members and drivers, obviously, after the spate of attacks, and there has been the most recent one where a driver suffered quite a serious injury and was in hospital. That brought morale down to a very low level. But since then, through, as you would be aware, after negotiations between TAMS and ACTION drivers, morale is up there again; it is looking good. If we keep moving in the right direction with the government, things will be in a much better place.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much for coming in this afternoon, Mr Sweaney. We will provide you with a copy of the transcript as soon as we can. Any questions on notice we will get to you as well.

Mr Sweaney: Thank you.

Meeting adjourned from 3.32 to 4.10 pm.

BO'SHER, MR LUKE, Policy Officer, Youth Coalition of the ACT
HUNTER, MS MEREDITH, Director, Youth Coalition of the ACT

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the Select Committee on Estimates 2007-2008. This afternoon we have Ms Meredith Hunter and Luke Bo'sher from the Youth Coalition of the ACT. Thanks again for coming in. Just before we begin, I will read the privileges card to you.

The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules contained in the resolution agreed by the Assembly on 7 March 2002 concerning the broadcasting of Assembly and committee proceedings. Before the committee commences taking evidence, let me place on the record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee in evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attached to parliament, its members and others necessary to the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution.

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So welcome back. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Bo'sher: Thanks very much. At the Youth Coalition of the ACT we put in a budget submission each year and do a budget analysis. I have brought a copy of both of those along.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We will not be able to authorise for publication the copy of the analysis until some time in the future.

Ms Hunter: As an opening statement, the view of the Youth Coalition of the ACT is that it was not the best budget we have seen for young people and it certainly was not the worst budget we have seen for young people. It was certainly an improvement on last year, particularly with the cuts to SAAP funding. There were some new initiatives that we welcomed that came out of this year's budget, particularly new funding for vulnerable children, extra funding for disability services, increased mental health funding, expanded youth health services, increased funding for libraries and capital investment for public housing, and also a start to implement the affordable housing strategy initiatives as well. We did welcome those initiatives.

I guess the big gaping hole for us, again, as a peak organisation, as a member of the community sector, was any sorts of initiatives or funding that were going to address the community sector viability issues that we have been raising and lobbying on for some years, along with other peak organisations such as the ACT Council of Social

Service and others. So that for us was a big gap and it certainly is one that we will be continuing to lobby government on.

There is an urgent need to be starting to address the issue of wages in the community sector. We have heard for many years the argument from the ACT about the need to ensure that public servant wages are attractive because of the sort of poaching or the flow of workers to the commonwealth. We certainly understand that argument. We would be saying that the community sector has been left way, way, way behind all of those sectors of the workforce and there is a desperate need. There is a real problem with recruitment and retaining staff. We know that there is something like a 30 per cent turnover within the community sector, where it is very hard to retain that corporate knowledge. It also can lead to an issue around providing a quality and consistent service to clients as well. So there is a major issue there.

The community sector task force reported to government in the last 12 months. I do not think a government response has been published to date but we certainly want to see some of those recommendations moved ahead. The key ones for us at this time are around wages and conditions, which are incredibly important. Alongside that is, obviously, professional development. Community agencies' budgets are very, very tight. Sometimes money is set aside for training to ensure that people improve their knowledge and skills or in fact learn about new ways of doing things but there is not necessarily money in the budget to do that. And so we are really keen that that whole issue of professional development and training is also addressed.

MRS BURKE: Meredith, what was the report?

Ms Hunter: The community sector task force—a joint community-government task force that looked at issues. Portable long service leave and a number of other issues were covered in that report.

Mr Bo'sher: Another key issue for us out of this budget was around housing. Obviously the budget contained a number of initiatives, including increasing the capacity of public housing through the \$4.3 million in addition to the \$30 million over three years for public housing stock, as well as a range of affordable housing initiatives. However, for the most part, we think that young people have been left out of these initiatives.

Young people face a range of barriers for accessing accommodation, and these barriers are influenced by a whole range of different things because, as we know, housing is part of a broader social life and not just isolated from the issue of housing itself. But young people in the private rental market in Canberra are finding it increasingly difficult to access housing. A lot of young people are, firstly, priced out of the market through high rents that are unaffordable, particularly given training wages and apprentice wages and Centrelink student support. So for a lot of young people the private rental market is not an affordable option, and that is a barrier that a lot of people in the Canberra community are facing at the moment.

But in addition to that, young people face extra barriers above and beyond the issue of price in the private rental market. Because there is such a tight private rental market at the moment in Canberra, young people who can afford to access that market are

sometimes unable to because they are being discriminated against in the private rental market. When there are 20 or 30 applicants for a house, young people are way down on the list of who is going to be selected for that property.

So one of the issues that we are finding is that young people really need some extra initiatives and some extra support to access public housing in the ACT. For that reason we think that the eligibility for public housing in the ACT should be modified to ensure that young people's additional barriers should be taken into account when assessing young people's need for public housing. We think this would be a really supportive way to engage with young people, particularly in ACT housing, which is a really important source of accommodation for a lot of young people, and one of the only options that a lot of them have at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Are there any questions?

MRS BURKE: Very quickly on the back of that. How would you propose that the government changes the eligibility criteria? I did note that it did knock off a lot of people on the waiting list, and that was my big concern. I was public about that. How would you propose that they go about it? Or is there a completely different sort of set-up for housing for young people that we need to look at?

Mr Bo'sher: I think what we really need to see is some flexibility in there around that eligibility, so that there is some discretion for housing officers and for the ACT government to make decisions on a case-by-case basis, looking at the individual circumstances of young people and the sorts of barriers that they in particular might be facing.

Ms Hunter: So it could be using discretionary powers under the act, or it could actually be going that step further. Obviously, when you are talking about change you may also be looking at legislative change, and that is a longer process. But there is discretion within the act.

MRS BURKE: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: I take on board what you said before: you have not yet seen a formal response to the task force report, and that that is what you are looking for. Did you see anywhere in the budget papers any recognition of any of the recommendations? Whilst there has not been a formal report, I wondered whether you have found anything in the budget which is an indication that at least the government had heard some of what was said in the recommendations.

Ms Hunter: One of the positive things was the announcement in last year's budget which was around the new indexation model, and that was continued this year. So, of course, we welcome that. So indexation passed on for grants will be 3.75 per cent. Mary, I am not aware of anything else that was related.

As the chair of the joint community-government reference group, I have received a letter from the Chief Minister informing me and other members of the community that

it has now been decided that Minister Gallagher will be carrying this whole area forward, which is great. We have got an identified minister to go to and talk about how we can pursue these recommendations or these issues. But I am not aware of anything else specifically.

MRS BURKE: I suppose on the flip side of that, are you aware of any broken promises other than the recommendations? Maybe we will need to get back to that. But are there things that may have been promised last year or happened that have now stopped that you would like to see back again?

Ms Hunter: No, not necessarily that. It is more that the issues have been put up and have been lobbied but we are just not getting what we consider at this point of time to be a response. It is not as though these are new issues. We are probably up to year four of lobbying around these issues, and during that time obviously there have been a number of different working sectors. We have teachers, we have got nurses, we have got public servants who have all come up to renew their agreements that have included wage increases or improvements or whatever in working conditions. And we are just not feeling that we are being heard. Part of that might be that our strategy needs to be spruced up a bit, but certainly we do feel that it is time now. It really is quite critical.

I think the task force report mentions a figure of on average around about \$20,000 behind, if you are on a community sector wage, a similar type of job in the ACT government. That is significant. So you can see that for a lot of people when they are having to pay their mortgage and feed their children and all those sorts of things, hard decisions have to be made. So you may end up working in government, although your commitment and passion might be in a disability service. There is just no way you could continue in that employment with the current wages and conditions.

Of course, we know that government and community are working under a compact, we are working in partnership, and government acknowledges the importance of that partnership and the importance that the community sector plays in delivering services. We are grateful for that. We just need to go that step further and have some financial acknowledgement of that as well.

DR FOSKEY: I was wondering if you could give me a broadbrush assessment of whether any particular groups of young people could have done with a bit more attention in the budget, and suggest what those groups are and what might be done.

Ms Hunter: Mental health would be an area. I think in our budget submission and in our press release we are quite clear that we absolutely applaud that the ACT government is going in the right direction with mental health funding. Up to approximately eight per cent of the health budget is now spent on mental health. This is the right direction, so we applaud that. The ACT government has made a commitment to get up to 12 per cent. In future budgets we would certainly like to see more put into the area around an adolescent inpatient facility. We desperately need one in the ACT.

There were some initiatives this year around mental health that we are very pleased about. That is a costly item but it is absolutely an essential item. We are getting more

and more reports back of the number of children and adolescents who are having to go to Sydney to have assessments and also to have that sort of care provided. So it is something that has to be in the mix when we are talking about the whole area of mental health and mental health precincts, and whatever that might need and whatever might be provided is absolutely critical. We have also got rising rates of young people and children who are displaying mental illness in one form or another, and so it is quite critical that we have responses.

I guess one of the things we put in our budget submission was requesting some funding so that we can really get a handle on what is out there in the ACT, what is provided, what the eligibility for it is, where it stops and starts, where the gaps are and therefore what is actually needed to complete the picture. We were unsuccessful in that bid but it is quite critical that that work be done because it is no good trying to put this together in a piecemeal way. I think we need to have a really good picture of what is and is not out there so that we can spend our money wisely and be addressing the needs of the children and young people we are speaking about.

THE CHAIR: Ms Hunter, on page 25 of your submission you talk about public housing access and you have asked specifically for capital investment. But towards the end of the submission you say that you do not believe the ACT public housing system is one that should be only welfare focused. This afternoon we have had a discussion about security of tenure in public housing. Can you give me your views on that?

Ms Hunter: The Youth Coalition supports security of tenure, so that if you go in it can be cradle to grave housing regardless of your income. The reason that we support that is, first, because it is public housing. We have never believed that it should be welfare housing, because that comes with a whole lot of other issues and problems that seem to follow that around. It should be like a public library or public transport. It is public housing. Another really critical issue for me is about market rent coming into the system. That market rent really keeps the whole system afloat and, without it, it can just fall over within the time that you move out your market renters.

I guess the latest changes have not gone to the extent that some other states and territories or state housing authorities have gone to. It has been, I suppose, more balanced within the picture, because we are talking about \$80,000 in income and so on. So it has sort of tried to find probably more of a middle ground. I guess the critical thing will be the discussions and consultations that are going to go on between the community and Housing ACT around the guidelines or how this will operate. There will be some exemptions. The system is supposed to or will, we assume, take into account someone with a disability who could not get housing anywhere else because his house has been modified. It could be somebody who is aged. It would be quite silly to move them out of their home and out of their suburb. So those things will be taken into account.

So I guess the consultation period as well is going to be quite critical in the next six months or whenever that time line is set out around what that looks like at the end of day. So it might be that in six months time we might have a clearer view on all that and what we think. But, generally, our policy platform and our policy has been quite clear that we do support security of tenure, obviously around income but also because

to us it is supposed to be public housing and not welfare housing. We are now quite clearly in an era where it is a welfare housing model.

Can I just make one other comment on that that I think is really important and that was in our press release. We are here about the ACT budget but really the federal government's role in all of this needs to be clearly stated. The federal government has actually been pulling money out of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement for a decade or so now. I think it is around about a 32 per cent drop in the funding that has gone into public housing, which has then forced state housing authorities to have to make these changes. So there is absolutely a responsibility there at the commonwealth level around this as well that needs to be noted.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

DR FOSKEY: I am sorry but, as I have another meeting to attend, I will not be able to continue with my questions. I will be back.

THE CHAIR: Mrs Burke.

MRS BURKE: I was thinking about dental health care for young people. How do you feel about this? Is there a higher need of dental care for the age groups of people that you deal with?

Ms Hunter: Yes. My understanding is that for children there is access to government dental care at no cost or low cost. But once you start getting to over 12s or whatever, your adolescent years, and certainly for those young people aged 18 to 25—and we know how costly it is to go to a dentist—it can actually break the bank big time if you have significant issues. So that is probably still an area that does need to be addressed. Again, I would say there is responsibility that also lies with the commonwealth around this issue of provision of dental care. To an extent there has been some money put in the budget.

MRS BURKE: Just on that, my understanding is that the commonwealth's responsibility is to provide doctors and dentists and so on; the provision of services for the actual care is the states' and territories' responsibility. I am just new to health and am getting my head around that too.

Ms Hunter: But I guess it is also still about how much you put into each of those components to make sure that it is meeting demand.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much for coming to the committee. We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can, together with any questions that may have been taken on notice.

Ms Hunter: Thank you, Mr Gentleman.

LUU, MR LOC, Chief Executive Officer, Havelock Housing Association Inc (ACT)
O'NEILL, MR KEL, Consultant; former board member, Havelock Housing Association Inc (ACT)

THE CHAIR: We now have the representatives from Havelock Housing Association Inc, Mr Loc Luu and Mr Kel O'Neill. Good afternoon. Welcome to the estimates committee for 2007. Just before we begin I will read the privileges card out for you.

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Again, welcome to the estimates committee. The committee has a short letter that was provided for publication earlier on, but I understand you have now given us another submission. We will not be able to authorise that for publication until we have read through that. We will do that as soon as we can. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Luu: Thank you. I guess we feel that the budget for this year has not really restored the budget cuts from the previous years. We certainly welcome some of the issues of the affordable housing initiative. We certainly welcome that, but we want to discuss the gaps in that plan, and we will do that at a later time.

Our concern is actually the future of the Havelock Housing Association and its viability in the long term, focusing on Ainslie Village in particular. There has been a forced change on the community from supported housing to community housing, and there is certainly a very clear understanding that there still needs to be a supported site. We are also concerned that the government has cut funding to the community housing sector in particular. The budget has not really highlighted any changes or any increase in funding, yet there is going to be a surplus in 2008. We are also concerned about the channelling of funding to affordable housing only to CHC. It is very obvious that the government strategy is aimed at reducing the funding to community housing providers. So our concern is very real and is there.

There is a serious deficiency with the affordable housing option with regard to the gap.

When I say gap, the CHC will be addressing the higher end affordable housing strategy, and that is the 74.99 per cent. There is also the selling of property to the affordable housing community, and we are looking at a range between \$200,000 and \$300,000. There is still a gap between the CHC and what Havelock is doing. Havelock concentrates on the 25 per cent of income market in particular, looking after the needy, specifically specialising in a number of mental health issues and working with a lot of different service providers.

But there is a gap above that, and that is the gap between the 25 per cent of income as compared to, say, the CHC, which is concentrating on the 74.99 and the affordable housing community, where you are talking about \$200,000 to \$300,000. There is still a gap. Havelock believes that we have the expertise and experience to address and fill that gap, of course with government support, and we would like that opportunity. We are seeking that opportunity.

MR STEFANIAK: Whereabouts would you be looking to do this and how many people would you be looking to accommodate?

Mr Luu: As you are aware, there are a number of issues. There are concerns about the closure of Currong.

MR STEFANIAK: Yes.

Mr Luu: That is about 150 students. There is also concern about the closure of Havelock House, and that is about 90 residents. I guess the government needs to establish how to resolve that and we have certain options that we would like to offer. With the closure of schools, we have some ideas how we can re-establish or redevelop these schools into student accommodation. We were having a bit of discussion with the minister's office yesterday. Some of the land surrounding schools could be, I suppose, redeveloped to house some of the Havelock tenants. If we can assist in that regard, then the government can reconsider redevelopment and so forth of Currong and Havelock.

MRS BURKE: You just alluded to the closure of Havelock. Can you explain that a little bit? I would be very concerned, given its site. We do not want to be pushing people out to the suburbs.

Mr O'Neill: I think one of the long-term issues with Havelock is that it is quite an old building and in respect of its viability as a residential unit, a large one, it is probably reaching the end of its economic life. I think that is an issue which has been recognised for some time. It did have a major refit in the year of the homeless, and that is quite some years ago now. It needs major work.

The other thing is that the actual model that was developed then, where you have clustered housing with groups living within the units, would appear to be not something that the market is actually accepting now. That has been developing over the last five or 10 years as well.

MRS BURKE: Just as a quick aside, is it heritage listed, that building? Are there going to be any issues there?

Mr Luu: Fire issues?

MRS BURKE: No. Is it heritage listed?

Mr O'Neill: There was an interim listing, but I am not clear on whether that was actually carried through. That goes back to the day when it was a police college. I think that, as a result of that, it got interim listing, but I do not know whether it was carried onto the register formally.

Mr Luu: There are some concerns, I think, from the government's point of view about heritage listing. I made some inquiries and I had a phone call questioning why that was so. The heritage listing is certainly one issue for discussion. But there is the need for a lot of refurbishment and repairs to the building. There are major plumbing issues and fire issues. There are cracks in some of the units. They cannot be used.

Mr O'Neill: I think the issue probably is that the building is probably quite suitable for certain office-type accommodation, but it is getting it up to that residential level. With some of the building codes that have been brought in in the last couple of years, residential is not happening unless major money is put into it to refurbish it totally, whereas it could be quite suitable for office accommodation. If the heritage thing is there, then it could be done, but that is an issue obviously for further examination.

THE CHAIR: What about the placement of Havelock in comparison to other housing, perhaps on old school sites? Would that be a concern for your residents, the move away from their current location?

Mr Luu: We would certainly have to do some surveys with our tenants. I am sure there are tenants that need to live closer to the city. One of the problems with living outside the city is, of course, all the amenities. Now, in most cases if you provide the amenities on site and provide regular transportation, I do not think distance is going to be a major factor. But, yes, I would like to do a survey with the tenants when the time is right to get their views on the distance and the locations. Absolutely!

MS PORTER: When you had those discussions with the minister with regard to school sites and your ideas around student accommodation, did you identify some particular sorts of locations, being closer to the city, that would be suitable, as Mr Gentleman was saying, for students to live?

Mr Luu: If I could just answer that indirectly in one way, Havelock House now has a mixture of both community and students and is working really well.

MS PORTER: Are you therefore saying that any future accommodation that you are looking for would be, again, a mixture?

Mr Luu: I think a mix is a good way of doing it. I believe that a mix brings out the betterness of the thing, especially if you have senior residents and so forth that are appointed, as in a student residential hall in a college. That is working well. We did not talk to the minister. We actually spoke to the officer that was appointed to look after the schools. They are waiting to appoint a consultant to do a consultative

analysis. But some schools were mentioned—Hall, I think Giralang and so forth. There are certain schools have been allocated to community use. It is a long way away, but it is just something that the board and I have been discussing with regard to the future of Havelock in general, and also Currong. We are very concerned about Currong.

MRS BURKE: Have you had an indication of how long you will be on the site at Havelock?

Mr Luu: No. There has been for quite some time, even before my time, some mention of the future of Havelock House, more so more recently because of the fire assessment.

MRS BURKE: Is that fire assessment a public document?

Mr Luu: Not that I understand. It is not a public document, no.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming and presenting to the estimates committee. We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can and any questions on notice as well.

McGOWAN, MR RUSSELL, President, HealthCare Consumers Association of the ACT

THE CHAIR: I welcome Mr Russell McGowan from the HealthCare Consumers' Association of the ACT. Thanks very much for coming in to the estimates committee, Mr McGowan. I will read the privileges card for you.

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Welcome again, Mr McGowan. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr McGowan: Yes, I will, thank you. We are pleased to see that the government has honoured its commitment to grow the health budget in real terms and we congratulate the health minister for listening to the community's expression of its health care needs in providing funds for additional services in areas we have previously highlighted: mental health services, rehabilitation and aged care, chronic condition management and dental health services.

However, we are a bit bemused that she has subsequently signalled a review of our future health care needs, including a possible third public hospital, without making provision for it in the budget. Our two public hospitals are doing a great job for the ACT community, but we closed down our third hospital a decade ago in recognition of the changing nature of health care. A new hospital is the most expensive and not necessarily the most effective solution but no doubt, if we build it, new patients will come.

If we want to invest in new health infrastructure, we could consider networking current health facilities better to share diagnostic images and medication records, et cetera, electronically to ensure more flexibility in the nature and location of our new health facilities. These might include more step-down facilities, regional-type hospital facilities, such as the new one being developed in Queanbeyan, GP plus type clinics, specialist outpatient clinics with diagnostic imaging support and perhaps even a second hospice.

In the meanwhile, we have concerns that incremental increases in current services will not adequately address increases in demand from an ageing and more demanding population. Recognising that one in five people in the community will face mental illness in their lifetime and that this is an area of chronic underspend by government at both national and territory level, the ACT government has rightly provided an extra \$12.6 million for mental health services over the next four years.

It seems that the budget has provided \$2.3 million for forward design of a 40-bed adult mental health unit and \$1.2 million for design of a 15-bed secure mental health unit. We implore the government to ensure that funds provided for services across these areas are carefully balanced and not reserved just for crisis response services in the acute care sector. We applaud the measured approach that has been taken in recent years to developing mental health services.

The same cannot yet be said of the development of an integrated strategy in servicing the growing needs of those with other chronic diseases to ensure that more services can be provided in community settings where they can be most effective in promoting wellbeing and reducing demand for the more expensive services in the acute care sector. While the government has allocated an additional \$2 million over four years for the early detection of chronic diseases and referral of patients to appropriate disease management programs, this is merely a drop in the bucket. Chronic conditions such as congestive lung disease, heart failure and diabetes and forerunner conditions such as obesity, high blood pressure and glucose intolerance not only cause suffering for individuals affected, but also cost the Australian community billions each year in increased acute sector costs and lost productivity.

One essential part of chronic condition management is better integrated patient records to improve identification and accurate diagnosis of chronic disease and to streamline interventions, such as drug therapies designed to improve consumer health outcomes. For this reason it is disappointing that there has been no financial commitment to electronic prescribing trials and the integration of these into electronic health records, which would also include digitised imaging records.

A specific program needing more support is public dental health services. Good dental health is rightly acknowledged as a major factor in overall physical and mental health. Poor dental health can lead to a range of other serious health problems and also affects people's self-esteem. The budget does nothing to address the access by low income earners, other than health care cardholders. These other low income earners cannot afford private dental health care or private health insurance that might support that access. Some attempt to address this would need to be factored into future health budget initiatives.

Similarly, while the ACT government will provide \$10.4 million over the next four years to enhance the mix of services for aged and rehabilitation care, there may be many older consumers whose health care needs will not be met in a timely way. Patients requiring admission to the acute and subacute rehabilitation units may well have slightly easier access, but there remains a severe backlog in provision of approved residential care beds, as well as a severe shortage of enhanced community-based program and service support. This is not just a buck which could be

passed to the commonwealth. The ACT government has to continue to take responsibility to provide services to meet health care needs of the frail elderly population in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr McGowan. Members, are there any questions for Mr McGowan? Mrs Burke.

MRS BURKE: Thank you very much for appearing before us this afternoon. I think you mentioned GP plus clinics. Can you tell us what you would like to see there?

Mr McGowan: Yes. My understanding is that this is a team approach to primary health care which integrates GP services and allied health services into the one location, and these are community-based locations. So, rather than the GP having to send somebody off for imaging or for physiotherapy or for dietician support, they would all be available in a—

MRS BURKE: One-stop shop.

Mr McGowan: coherent process.

MRS BURKE: Yes. It sounds good.

Mr McGowan: Now, as I say, they have been funded in other jurisdictions. I do not know how well they have been implemented at this stage, but I certainly think they are worthy of consideration as an alternative to just building another hospital.

MRS BURKE: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Any further questions? Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: Through you, chair, I just wanted to ask a little bit about the prescribing trial, how that works.

Mr McGowan: Yes. We are a little concerned that the government has announced previously that it is going to look at electronic prescribing, which actually improves safety of medication for patients, particularly in the acute care sector, and it has made some money available for piloting these techniques. But the problem is that it has not then guaranteed to expand it out beyond the pilot into the health care system as a whole. We think that is essential, as we do the notion of an integrated health record across all sectors, not just the hospital but the primary health care sector, which takes account of all of the medications that a patient has had, all of the diagnostic tests they have undergone and other relevant records so that these integrated records ensure the highest quality services across all levels of the health sector.

MS PORTER: May I ask a further question?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MS PORTER: Going back to your comment about the scoping paper or whatever it is the minister might decide to do into additional health facilities for the region or the

ACT or whatever—but basically for the ACT because we do not have any control of the region, I suppose—you mentioned that you felt that perhaps there should be some additional services provided in the region, and you used as an example the Queanbeyan hospital. Are you suggesting therefore that you believe the New South Wales government should be taking more of the load of the people that they are sending to our trauma hospital? Is that what you are suggesting?

Mr McGowan: Well, I think there are agreements in place about cross-border provision of services, and we need to be mindful of those, but we also need to be mindful of the increase in demand that that imposes on the ACT services. But what I was trying to say was that some of those needs can be met more locally with the provision of the right sorts of services, rather than saying that everyone that needs to be hospitalised in Queanbeyan needs to come to the ACT. Maybe more of those needs, certainly the less acute needs, can be met in community hospital-type settings, rather than in acute hospital settings because those are much more expensive and disruptive.

We know that a large number of the in-patients in our acute hospitals are from the capital region, the surrounding region, and we are certainly not arguing that they should not be able to have access to services in the tertiary care hospital at TCH in particular. We are just saying that often their needs can be better met in a less acute setting, you know, more of a community-type hospital that I am sure you are familiar with that has existed in the past—

MS PORTER: Yes.

Mr McGowan: and that maybe there is scope for those sorts of facilities. Indeed, the subacute facility that was recently opened at Calvary is such a facility.

MS PORTER: Yes. So you are saying that it would be good if the government could explore more of those—

Mr McGowan: Yes, less intensive settings for—

MS PORTER: through this research that the minister is seeming to float at the moment?

Mr McGowan: That is right. At this stage she has just referred it to the department. I would have thought that it required a more fully blown investigation.

MS PORTER: We will wait to see what it will be.

Mr McGowan: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Any other questions for Mr McGowan?

MRS BURKE: Thank you, chair. I would like an expansion of what you mentioned in regard to integrated strategies for, I think you were saying, the management of chronic disease. Can you tell us what that would look like in your eyes?

Mr McGowan: Yes. Clearly some of the crises that people reach in their chronic

conditions that require acute sector treatment can be forestalled if they get intervention at an earlier stage which is less intensive and less expensive. Part of that is helping people to be in touch with other people who suffer from similar conditions. This is called self-management and peer support, and we would like to see more and more effort being put into raising people's awareness of their conditions and the ways that they can behave, for example, by limiting unhealthy food intake, by exercising more and by recognising symptoms at an early stage where the intervention will not require hospitalisation.

MRS BURKE: It all sounds really simple on paper, does it not?

Mr McGowan: Well, it is clearly not and nobody is—

MRS BURKE: I was not being flippant. It is going to take somebody to make some hard decisions. In terms of costing, what—

Mr McGowan: There are some programs in place already, but they need to be—

MRS BURKE: Pulled together.

Mr McGowan: further supported. They are based on the Stanford model of self-management, for example, and the ACT government is committed to that, but the number of people accessing those programs is rather less than we would like to see. We just see there being benefit in investing more in those sorts of programs.

MRS BURKE: The Stanford program?

Mr McGowan: The Stanford model that Kate Lorig developed for chronic condition self-management.

MRS BURKE: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Mr McGowan, thank you very much for coming in to the committee today. We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can and any questions on notice.

COBBOLD, MR TREVOR, Spokesperson, Save Our Schools
MORGAN, DR IAN, Member, Save Our Schools

THE CHAIR: We now have the Save Our Schools group before the estimates committee. Mr Trevor Cobbold and Dr Ian Morgan, welcome. Were you here when I read the privileges card out earlier on?

Mr Cobbold: No.

THE CHAIR: I will just read that for you.

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Mr Cobbold and Dr Morgan, thank you very much for coming in. We have your submission, which was presented today, but as yet we have not been able to authorise it for publication. We will do that as soon as we can. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Cobbold: Yes, thank you very much. I understand that you would not have had a chance to look at our submission. It is a fairly substantial submission, as you can see. I would like to take the opportunity to run through what we see as the main points in the submission and highlight some of the recommendations. I will not go through all the recommendations.

Essentially, our submission consists of two parts. The first issue is dealing with some of the outstanding issues and matters arising from the *Towards 2020* school closure program of last year. We are raising a number of issues in relation to that—that we think are relevant. Secondly, we consider some other, broader aspects of government education policy as it relates to school education, and we raise some issues about that.

On the matter of school closures, we make the observation that the financial figures

provided in this year's budget and last year's budget bear on one of the key rationales for the government school closure program of last year—the financial rationale. Last year we were told that we could no longer afford the neighbourhood school and that significant efficiencies needed to be made in school education; the school closure program was an important aspect of that strategy to obtain financial efficiencies.

We think that this year's budget shows that the community was duped about the financial rationale for school closures. This year's budget papers show that the ACT government sector is not in the dire financial situation asserted by government ministers last year. For example, for 2006-07 a budget surplus of \$39 million is now estimated instead of the \$80 million deficit predicted last year. That is, there has been a turnaround of \$120 million, and that is not an insignificant turnaround.

Moreover, a budget surplus has been achieved in each of the last six years; the aggregate surplus from 2001-02 to 2006-07 was \$617 million. I recall the then Treasurer in 2002-03 saying that the budget strategy of the new government was to achieve a balanced budget over the period to 2005-06. Yet, as I say, the government has achieved an aggregate surplus totalling over \$600 million in that period. In addition, an aggregate surplus of a further \$321 million is projected for the next four years, and there are other broad indicators of the strong and robust financial situation facing the ACT government sector.

For example, the ACT had negative general government sector net debt in 2007, and its net debt to revenue ratio of minus 80 per cent was the lowest of any jurisdiction in Australia for this financial year. The ACT has a lower net financial liabilities to revenue ratio—of 53 per cent—than most other jurisdictions in Australia. And the ACT has a strong positive net worth—that is, total assets less total liabilities. Its net worth as a proportion of revenue was 358 per cent in 2006-07; this was the strongest of any jurisdiction in Australia. The talk of dire financial circumstances as the rationale for closing local neighbourhood schools does not seem to stand up to those kinds of figures.

We draw the committee's attention to the issue of financial savings to the ACT government from the school closure program. We submit that those savings to the education department have been overestimated and did not include costs to other government agencies arising from the implementation of the program. Rather than go on and waste time, let me say that we have detailed the sources of those savings, and we are suggesting that the estimates committee refer these matters to the public accounts committee—sorry, to the Auditor-General for inquiry and review, to determine the net outcome of the school closure program to the whole of government. We believe that the gross savings figures that have been provided by the government refer only to gross savings to the department of education and do not include costs that are being incurred by other government agencies.

MRS BURKE: You are referring to recommendation 3?

Mr Cobbold: Yes, recommendation 3. The reason I got confused about the public accounts committee is that I missed a point that I should have made earlier: when you look at the Treasury's estimates of surpluses and deficits over the last six years, you find that the Treasury has consistently underestimated the net budget outcome one

way. In the normal course of events, you would think—because they are estimates and projections for the future, you cannot preclude that you are going to get them wrong because of unexpected circumstances. But you do expect to come in one way or the other—in the red or in the black. But over the last six years the Treasury has underestimated the aggregate net budget outcome by \$528 million, and it is all one way.

Those of us who have worked in government know what happens in treasuries. Treasury consistently tries to create a climate where community needs are not always fully recognised. We suggest that this consistent failure of Treasury to accurately estimate budget outcomes—sorry, the bias that appears to be occurring in their estimation—needs to be reviewed. We are suggesting that the estimates committee should refer the matter to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

The final point I would like to make in relation to the *Towards 2020* school closure program is that—given the financial outcome of the budget and what has happened over previous years, and given the indicators of the robustness of the financial situation of the government sector in the ACT—it is easy to understand that many parents and people that we have had contact with in several schools that have been closed and are due to close are quite concerned that they have lost access to a local school, they have lost the chance of attending a small school, and they have incurred additional financial and other costs, with low-income families being hit the hardest because most of the schools that are being closed serve communities of low socioeconomic status.

It is of concern that people have lost these facilities and incurred higher costs for what appears to be financial duplicity on the part of the ACT government. Ultimately some 2,000 children will have to travel longer distances to and from school as a result of schools being fully closed or partially closed. I remind the committee that it is not just a matter of full closure of schools: four or five schools—I will have to check that—are being partially closed and are becoming P-2 schools. The parents of children in years 3 to 6 are in fact losing their school. For them the school is closing.

Taking account of that, we estimate that up to some 2,000 children will have to travel longer distances to and from school. Many of those students face increased traffic risks in walking or cycling to more distant schools, especially where they have to cross busy roads. We are concerned that the ACT government has yet to acknowledge the safety risks to children crossing major thoroughfares in order to access a new school; we are suggesting an audit of traffic safety infrastructure in those areas affected by school closures. We are not experts in that area. Our advice from many parents is there are some potential black spots, but the way to resolve that is to do a proper audit of traffic safety in the areas affected.

If I could just turn to the second part of our submission—

THE CHAIR: While you are doing that, Mr Cobbold, I will just remind you that we are almost out of time.

Mr Cobbold: I will be very brief because I am sure you want to ask us some questions. In brief, we are concerned that a government that was elected on a program

of improving equity in education appears to have abandoned that goal. We have set out the case there. We have also set out the case that the goal of equity in education should be renewed. We believe that it is the fundamental issue facing ACT education, and it demands recurrent expenditure, not expenditure on bricks and mortar. We welcome the expenditure to upgrade facilities, but at the moment that is the total program of ACT government education policy. It is not addressing the most fundamental needs in our system. We have drawn attention to those with some figures and we have highlighted student learning need and welfare needs in high school as a particular area, especially given that at the last election the ACT government's key election promise on school education was to inject an additional \$12 million in recurrent funding into government high schools and that has not appeared. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Cobbold.

MR STEFANIAK: In relation to savings on school closures, do you have any current figures to indicate what savings there would be? My recollection of any savings is that they were very minimal, at best, in terms of the savings you get from closing a primary school or a high school. I hear your comments in relation to the budget generally. I just wondered if you had any figures on just what you actually do save by closing a school.

Mr Cobbold: We were not able to convince the government to provide the clear figures last year. We certainly believe that there is a case to look at those figures more closely. For that reason, we believe that the Auditor-General should do a review. It is a bit hard to revisit the school closures of last year, but for the purpose alone of public accountability, on the government's estimates of savings from school closures, we believe that there is enough doubt about the factors that have not been taken into account in those gross figures to have a closer look at the whole-of-government costs and look at deriving a net savings or cost figure. At the moment, I think it is an open call on whether it is actually savings or costs to government.

MR STEFANIAK: We will tease this out when we have the education minister, but it would seem from the budget that to date the savings are in the vicinity of only about \$1.6 million, which does not appear to be a particularly huge figure given the fact that that we appear to be in surplus—the other point you raise.

DR FOSKEY: I have a quick question. What would you like to see happening to improve the issues that you have raised around equity and to increase the value of public education for the students that you identify as being most disadvantaged?

Mr Cobbold: The most serious problem is the large achievement gap between the highest and lowest achieving students in our system. It is amongst the highest in Australia and it is amongst the highest in the high-income developed countries in the world. This is, in a sense, a condemnation of our system. We have got high average outcomes but a very large gap in outcomes; that gap is most apparent in the achievement of students from low SES backgrounds and high SES backgrounds, and it is most apparent in our high schools. We are calling for a comprehensive high school development program. In our view, that has been ignored in the ACT for almost 20 years, despite inquiries and despite calls for change. It is not just this government; it has been previous governments. It has been going on for a long time.

This is the area where there is least confidence in our community with the public education system, yet we have not been addressing the issues for almost 20 years.

THE CHAIR: All right. Thank you very much for coming in this afternoon. We are out of time. We will get to authorising your submission for publication as soon as we can, and we will also get a copy of the transcript and any questions on notice to you as soon as we can. Thank you very much.

Mr Cobbold: Thank you.

MRS BURKE: Thank you very much indeed.

VIERECK, MR SIMON, Executive Officer, ACT Mental Health Consumer Network

WILLIAMS, MS JANE, Deputy Chair, ACT Mental Health Consumer Network

THE CHAIR: I welcome witnesses from the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network, Mr Simon Viereck and Ms Jane Williams. Were you here earlier when I read out the privileges card?

Ms Williams: No.

THE CHAIR: I will read that out for you.

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Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Viereck: Yes, please. Firstly, I would like to thank you for listening to us today. I will give a short description of our organisation. The ACT Mental Health Consumer Network is the peak body for members of the ACT community with experience of personal mental illness—in other words, mental health consumers. Since 1999, the network has represented the interests of mental health consumers in the ACT, and the commonwealth as well.

The network has a growing membership. We strive to represent the interests not only of our membership but of the entire 7,000 or so people with mental illness who are seen by the public mental health system every year. We also strive to represent the interests of those with mental illness who are not seen by the public mental health services, by advocating for better and easy access, more prevention and earlier intervention measures in the community.

Ms Williams: At this point, the role of the mental health consumer network, as Simon

just said, is to represent mental health consumers in the ACT. One of the important reasons for this is that we are the only people that have mental health legislation concerning our mental health and wellbeing. With the review of mental health legislation that is happening at the moment, we need to get in best practice. We would like to be the organisation that—when government or bureaucracies would like some sort of consumer input, they can say, “Yes, the mental health consumer network.” We asked for additional funding of \$140,000 this year. That would help us mainly with the review of the act, but also with the health services review that is going on. We really need somebody who is going to be in research and policy development so that we can get a really good legal mental health bill.

That is really where we are coming from: we want to represent our consumers as best we can.

Mr Viereck: Yes. In 1996, at the federal level we developed national mental health standards. Standard 3 of those standards says:

Consumers and carers are involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the MHS.

As we said, the network is the key community sector partner for ACT Health with respect to consumer participation. ACT Health and Mental Health ACT have shown a commitment to implementing standard 3 by developing a framework for consumer and carer participation across Mental Health ACT and by initiating the development of a framework for ACT Health as a whole. They have done so in collaboration with consumers and carers. Unfortunately, this commitment in words has yet to be matched by a commitment of resources. As we said, we did put in a budget submission to ask for extra resources to enable us to fully and meaningfully participate in the evaluation, planning and development of mental health services.

Ms Williams: Yes. At the moment, what we are trying to do is train up representatives. We have got the New South Wales Institute of Psychiatry in Sydney offering consumer education to help us find representatives, so that we can have a professional basis for going onto various government committees. That is just one part of what we do. There are also the broader issues. We recognise that housing is a really important area—which I am sure you are quite aware of too: safe secure housing. Sometimes, with security of housing, it is just not quite common. Window locks, for instance, should be a given—and special security screens. If people are feeling threatened, the home is a valuable place.

Then we have the community that does not have a home—the homeless. As we are all well aware, most homeless people have a mental illness and/or a drug and alcohol problem. What happens to them? Who looks after them?

Also, we find that, with a lot of people that have entered the mental health system, quite often, if it is an involuntary way in which they are entering the system, they do not want to know again. They want to just drop out, go through the cracks and not be seen. They will become homeless; they will travel interstate. There are people that have orders against them that we all know travel interstate to get away from them. What we need is a caring, compassionate system. We want to take these people who

have fallen through the cracks and say, “Okay, you’ve had a really bad experience; help us try and give you a better experience so that that it’s not so frightening when you go in.”

Also, if people have complaints, we want them to be able to come to a body such as us and say, “Look, I felt that Joe Bloggs from the crisis team really wasn’t effective.” We also have the situation of people that go to the crisis team for help and they say, “You’re not sick enough at the moment. We don’t think that we need you.”—and the next time they present, they are slapped with an involuntary order because people have not listened. This is what we deal with—the people that just slip through the cracks. We are trying to bring them in; we are trying to get their voices heard.

That is why we are such a special organisation—because we try and do that. Last year alone, I believe that 512 new people presented before the Mental Health Tribunal. That is an awful lot of new people. That is not including the people that have been known and have come up again. That is what we want: we want these people to come to us to have their voice heard.

Mr Viereck: Yes. In that respect, we must say that, if the ACT government is truly committed to meaningful consumer and carer participation, it really must make available the resources necessary to make that possible.

I would also like to say something in relation to the housing issue. The ACT Legislative Assembly’s Standing Committee on Health and Disability recently released a report on appropriate housing for people living with mental illness. It is a very good report. It identifies a number of these problems. Among other things I would like to point out, it says:

The waiting lists for general public housing are combined with a relatively small number of houses specifically reserved for people with a mental illness.

That contributes to the problem. The report continues:

There are 213 funded places in supported accommodation, spread across four different categories ...

The Director of Mental Health Services for the ACT, Dr Brown estimated that four to five hundred accommodation units of various types were required “to meet the social and treatment needs of people with a mental illness” ...

Unfortunately, the report also says:

Regrettably there are numerous examples of mental health patients moving through various unsatisfactory situations receiving virtually no professional support and having little opportunity to re-establish themselves in the community.

This report really makes clear a number of the issues coming out of this very important area for people living with mental health issues. And there are some obvious gaps: for example, if consumers go to hospital their rent will be paid for them, but if they enter rehabilitation, or are for other reasons absent from their

accommodation, the rent will not be paid, and often they lose that accommodation.

The last issue we would like to bring up is the indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities who, once again, have been overlooked in the budget. A lot of these communities, particularly the people with mental health problems in these communities, are overlooked, and services are not available to them. Many of the available services are not appropriate; there are very few culturally appropriate services available. The Winnunga Nimmityjah health centre provides a relevant and appropriate service, but unfortunately it is not resourced to meet the demand. I believe it has a psychiatrist two days a week. That is pretty much all that the indigenous community has. The network would very much like to recommend—and have recommended it in other forums as well—the establishment of new appropriate services such as a healing farm to employ indigenous clinicians, including psychiatrists and specially trained workers, to deal with the culturally and linguistically diverse population.

To finish off, I would like to say something about the mental health part of the budget in general. There are positive indications in there. We are very happy to see the funding of a step-up, step-down facility. There are a number of other initiatives. And the funding has gone up compared with last year—\$12.6 million over four years this year, compared with about \$8 million last year. But there is still a long way to go to meet the government's pledge about getting 12 per cent of the total health budget to the mental health sector by 2012. We the consumers would like to hold the government to that pledge. We would like to see a lot of that money go into the community sector—to build capacity in the community sector and to provide some of the very necessary services, such as home-based support, rehabilitation services and other sub-acute care services.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your presentation. We are out of time, but do we have a couple of questions for our witnesses?

MRS BURKE: I do. I am just trying to get clarification. Your budget submission requested an extra \$350,000 per annum funding for extra positions in consumer consultants, consumer advocacy and peer support workers—is that correct?

Ms Williams: It was \$140,000.

Mr Viereck: We asked for \$140,000 for us in terms of supporting the participation work. The others—the consumer consultants, for example—are employed within ACT Mental Health.

MRS BURKE: Sorry, yes. Thank you for that clarification.

THE CHAIR: Any other questions?

MS PORTER: I just want to go back to the comment about people being not sick enough or being too sick. Would you see the step-up, step-down facility meeting that?

Ms Williams: That would go a long way.

MRS BURKE: I have one very quick last question. What is the importance of the healing farm?

Mr Viereck: The importance is that it is a culturally appropriate way of service for the indigenous community which recognises their traditional family-based way of healing.

MRS BURKE: And you would say that is one of the urgent priorities?

Mr Viereck: I would say that it is a real priority to deliver new services which are appropriate for the indigenous community, yes. Many of their needs are unmet at the moment.

MRS BURKE: Yes. Winnunga can only do so much. I agree.

Mr Viereck: Exactly.

MRS BURKE: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming in. We will get a copy of the transcript and any questions on notice to you as soon as possible.

FLINT, MR PAUL, Executive Director, Council on the Ageing (ACT)

THE CHAIR: Welcome back, Mr Flint. You were here this morning for another matter.

Mr Flint: Yes.

THE CHAIR: You are aware of the privileges card, Mr Flint?

Mr Flint: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Yes, so you understand that. Thank you very much. Would you like to make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr Flint: Yes. First of all, thank you for your invitation to COTA to come to this inquiry. When looking at the budget and the media releases, it was interesting to see that there is only one that mentions ageing, and that was No 97, the last one. That was a \$10.4 million boost to aged care and rehabilitation services.

With that sort of background, you might think that COTA would not be particularly pleased with the budget. However, we have had a look at it and taken a few things into account. First of all, if you assume that the assumptions behind it are correct, and that one-off or short-term projects are more appropriate in relation to the surplus, that modifies the view. When you look at the inclusion of items on other issues, there are many that in nature are directed at filling particular gaps.

There is really only one other issue that came up as a high priority for us, and that was dental health. We are particularly pleased with that item. It is a bit different in nature from what we recommended; we were seeing the higher priority being in residential aged care facilities and for people who are immobile within the community. Of course, that is a much more difficult area and needs a project to get it going in the ACT. We were very pleased with that dental health issue being up there and getting the funding.

There were a great range of other initiatives, particularly in the health area—the extra hospital beds, the elective surgery, the cancer. All of those are very important to older people, and we have recognised them as identified gaps that needed to be addressed. We are pleased with those items.

Overall, we recognise that the budget is at a high level in that it is an umbrella document. We recognise that that one item that mentioned aged care was the last one on the budget and has not been fully developed at this stage. We are very keen to see that it is developed and that there is that extra community care. I believe that it is quite good to have a community gerontologist involved in it; that is something that COTA has put up as a high priority issue in the past.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Flint. Recently there have been some statements about the availability of land for new aged care facilities. You are probably aware of the new agreements that the ACT government has made with the federal government in speeding that process up. Are you happy with the way that is going? Do you think there needs to be more work there? I know it is not specific to this particular budget,

but it is quite important.

Mr Flint: There is a significant lag between the allocation of beds and their coming into operation. That has been a long-running, difficult issue within Canberra. There have been many initiatives like the ones that you have mentioned. There is a group around that is concerned about us having too many beds in five years time or something like that, but that is a very remote thing. The difficulty is the current situation and getting current allocations into operation. The planning process seems to have improved, and that is good, but we still have the current situation to deal with. To be fair, the commonwealth and others have tried to supplement it at the community level, but that means that there are diverse needs within the community for support, and they are still quite significant.

THE CHAIR: Dr Foskey.

DR FOSKEY: Paul, you did not put in a submission—or at least we do not have one here. If you had been writing the budget, I am wondering what initiatives you would have suggested that would have the greatest impact on improving the lives of elderly people in Canberra, particularly those who are disadvantaged in terms of income and assets.

Mr Flint: We did put in a budget submission. We put oral health as our—

DR FOSKEY: Canberra seniors centre?

Mr Flint: No. We called it “Sustaining community services”.

THE CHAIR: Sorry, I will just interrupt for a moment. You said that you have put in a budget submission. That was to the Treasurer, not to this committee?

Mr Flint: That is correct.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

DR FOSKEY: It would be very much appreciated if you could forward that to the committee.

MRS BURKE: To the committee.

Mr Flint: I can give you a copy now.

MRS BURKE: Great, thank you.

Mr Flint: I assumed it came through.

MRS BURKE: I will not say what we say about the word “assumed”.

DR FOSKEY: Sorry, I have probably asked you a question that you have dealt with very well. In that case, you do not have to answer in detail.

Mr Flint: No, but we saw oral health as the key issue that has other medical and other ramifications, particularly for people that are immobile, either within the community or within facilities. That was our top issue. Then we had some transport issues. And we had affordable rental as another key issue for older people—and the uncertainty that goes around the commercial rental market, particularly for older people.

We talked about the land for residential aged care facilities and the modelling that has been done. We believe that modelling was quite an adequate basis for planning to ensure that we get that land on track, on supply. We talked about road safety and transport needs. This morning, we talked about ACTION—not only ACTION but also the broader community transport needs—as a high priority issue. And there is the issue of employment for people over 55—linking up with super and income in retirement. Our last issue was appropriate funding of non-government organisations. They were the sorts of issues that we picked out as the key issues in the budget context.

THE CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Flint. Mrs Burke is first; then Dr Foskey and Ms Porter.

MRS BURKE: Thank you for being here today. I wanted to talk about well people—people who are not sick; there are a lot of well people out there as well—but you had already alluded to the fact that that would be an initiative. Something in regard to employment over-55s is another one. If there is anything in your submission that we can pick up on that, that would be good. Another thing, in terms of non-government organisations, and perhaps a downturn in funding, what impact is that having on the aged community in Canberra from your perspective?

Mr Flint: If I can digress a bit, COTA has been involved at the federal level in a forum on poverty. What is happening in relation to the general service level—not picking on any particular service—is that on average people are doing quite well, but there is a very long tail developing, and it seems to be getting worse. In relation to transport and accommodation—housing—you find that it is that tail of people that cannot afford to be in the current market in the current circumstances that seems to be lengthening. That is where the non-government services are generally operating, and they are the clients that we have.

Within the COTA environment, we have found that the housing issue for people in the private rental market is quite dire. It is much more difficult. On the other hand, we have found that ACT Housing has responded to people that fit their criteria and are in need, so we have had a good response there. But it is the people that just slip outside all these issues that are in a quite difficult situation. The other difficulty, of course, is people that fall out for multiple reasons rather than single reasons: it is not just transport; it is your health and your transport and your housing.

MRS BURKE: Compounding.

Mr Flint: Yes. You have had some income dislocation plus those other issues. That is where there is a concentration of problems and that is where there is a need for the NGOs.

THE CHAIR: Dr Foskey.

DR FOSKEY: Other groups that appeared this afternoon have said that they have been contacted by public housing residents who recently received a letter regarding excess rooms.

Mr Flint: Yes.

DR FOSKEY: Or if they happen to be earning an income that is deemed high enough and secure enough for them to move on. I am just wondering if COTA has had any representations from people in that category.

Mr Flint: Yes.

DR FOSKEY: What is the general feeling they are expressing?

Mr Flint: It is a very difficult issue. The problem is compounded with older people because it is part of their security—their life security. They are grieving about a whole lot of other issues—that they are losing capacity or things like that. To compound it with what is one of their key identifying things is very difficult. The other part that is difficult, too, is that most of the alternatives dislocate them from their social networks and all those things that come with the location of their house. Even though, for some of those people, it may not mean a change, it is very unsettling. On the other hand, we also see that a lot of those facilities are not actually what we would want or feel are appropriate. It is a double-edged sword. Our belief is that we have to create the appropriate facilities in the right location; then many of those people will want to move.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: I want to quickly go back to the dental and mobility issue. It may be in the submission that we are going to get, but were you talking about providing community transport for people to get to dentists or were you thinking about a sort of mobile bus that went around and initially saw people—to check people’s dental health while they are in a facility? Or is it a combination of both?

Mr Flint: We were not trying to determine what the appropriate solution was; we identified the problem.

MS PORTER: Okay.

Mr Flint: It seems to me that, whichever solution you provide, it will have to be used for people both in the community and in facilities, because we have the same problem. It is compounded by the difficulty of anyone accessing a dentist in the current environment. People that just cannot get there, cannot get there at the right time or require an ambulance for transport are in an unenviable position.

MS PORTER: Thank you, I just wanted to clarify that.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Flint. I note the time, and we have one more witness.

MS PORTER: Will you leave that copy of that speech?

Mr Flint: Yes.

BENNETT, MS MARIE, Executive Director, Lifeline Canberra

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: Please state your full name and the capacity in which you are appearing, Marie.

Ms Bennett: I am Marie Bennett, Executive Director of Lifeline Canberra.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: Marie, I don't know if you've heard the caution which is read to all members. Were you in the room when it was read?

Ms Bennett: I have heard it before.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: You have. Okay. The same applies. Effectively, what you say is privileged. If we ask you questions, you are meant to tell the truth, and you are well aware of that.

Ms Bennett: Yes.

THE DEPUTY CHAIR: All right, let's get on with it. What do you have to say?

Ms Bennett: I thank you all for the opportunity to appear before the committee this evening. Overall, Lifeline Canberra would express a measure of disappointment with the budget. Principally this is because it does little or nothing to enhance the community sector. As many other organisations have undoubtedly already pointed out to you today, the community sector, in particular the SAAP sector, experienced significant cuts in the last budget. While we are grateful that there have been no further cuts, we are seeing the impact of the cuts to the services in our front line.

Our counsellors take calls on the Canberra Emergency Accommodation Service line and are often unable to offer any hope of crisis accommodation to callers. I would like to highlight that it is families and women who are unable to access crisis accommodation. When we provided a submission to the budget process late last year, we advised the government that there were some 913 people who had called the CEAS crisis line over a six-month period for whom there was no appropriate crisis housing referral. This situation has not improved. These people continue to have no place to turn and no place to sleep.

We will be working with the Department of Housing, Disability and Community Services over the next 12 months to enhance the CEAS service so that securing crisis accommodation is simplified for clients. Ensuring that people are supported through their housing crisis by skilled workers with up-to-date knowledge about accommodation availability will not be easy, but it will ensure that those on the brink of homelessness have the best possible chance of making the transition to alternative accommodation.

I would also like to touch on the mental health services. Lifeline Canberra applauds the increase in funding for much-needed facilities for people experiencing a severe mental health crisis. However, there is little funding directed to those experiencing mild to moderate or emergent mental health issues. Our service continues to receive crisis calls from people who are experiencing mild to moderate mental health

symptoms and we are unable to refer them anywhere. These people would benefit from short-term face-to-face crisis counselling which could assist them to find strategies to deal with their situation or to prevent a moderate episode from escalating into a severe crisis. There are almost no counselling services available in the ACT for these people. Such a service would provide much-needed crisis intervention and would also serve a preventative role, potentially reducing the number of people who require more intensive and expensive mental health services.

The decision by the federal government to provide a Medicare rebate for accessing private psychologists has demonstrated just how significant a demand for mental health services there is. Data so far indicates that the new rebate is already significantly over budget and it is our fear that the government will not be able to sustain it. So the question is: what then? What will be available for many thousands of ACT residents who need counselling? Do we really have to wait for them to develop a severe mental illness or an episode before help is offered?

Community sector viability is more than just a catchcry of the politically active. It comes down to whether we are able to provide services like the Lifeline Canberra 24-hour crisis telephone counselling service to the ACT community. Lifeline, along with other parts of the sector, has experienced the difficulty of attracting staff or retaining those employees. We have recently had difficulty in filling two key positions within the organisation due to a small number of applicants and competition for suitable staff from other sectors that are able to pay higher wages. Community services require secure recurrent funding to be able to adequately provide services. We have had no increase in funding for service provision for many years.

The impact on sector viability extends beyond our paid staff. Providing the Lifeline service is not possible without our volunteers. We are finding however that, although we subsidise the cost of training to become a telephone counsellor, paying even the subsidised rate is a barrier to an increasing number of potential volunteers. The issue of attracting volunteers is not unique to Lifeline, and other organisations have undoubtedly raised this with you, but we are facing a crisis of volunteering. If we cannot attract, train and retain volunteers, then we cannot answer calls from members of the ACT community who are in crisis. Of course, to train and retain those additional volunteers we need somehow to find and pay more support staff. Volunteers cannot and do not work in a vacuum; they rely upon the support of skilled staff in order to be effective 24 hours a day, seven days a week, year in and year out.

We are disappointed that this budget seems to reflect a lack of government interest in the needs of the community sector. For Lifeline, this has an ongoing impact on our ability to provide and expand the crisis line service. We have always been a responsive service. We seek to be proactive in ensuring that we are able to respond to the needs of the community and we hoped that the ACT government would support us in enhancing our ability to be there for the people in need in this community.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much for that presentation. Do members have questions?

MR STEFANIAK: Yes. How much do you get now in the budget from the ACT government to support your good work?

Ms Bennett: To support the telephone counselling service, we get \$164,000 a year. That is about 30 per cent of the cost of providing the service to the community. The rest we raise. We have received about \$189,000 to provide the gambling and financial counselling service and that service is fully funded by the ACT government. We receive about \$80,000 to provide the CEAS service to the community, which is the emergency accommodation referral and counselling line. We receive about \$60,000 to provide the youth outreach service to young people in the community.

DR FOSKEY: Were there any increases at all in that funding in this budget?

Ms Bennett: We have received indexation for CEAS. That's all at this point.

DR FOSKEY: Did you receive indexation for the other services?

Ms Bennett: We haven't been informed that we will be receiving or not receiving anything. The CEAS indexation offer and variation has arrived, been signed and sent back, so that I can confirm.

MRS BURKE: As you know, I am a very big fan of CEAS, the Canberra Emergency Accommodation Service. Is there scope for expansion of the partnership? I have always believed that there was, but obviously you can't do it on a shoestring. If there were, how would that work and what load would it take off which sections of the community sector?

Ms Bennett: Indeed. We have commenced discussions with the department about expanding the role of the CEAS service. What we would like to do is to offer one point of contact and one point of entry to the SAAP sector.

MRS BURKE: That sounds good.

Ms Bennett: What we want to be able to do, in addition to being able to be the ones to know exactly where the services are that are available and who is in them, who is not and that sort of thing, is to—

MRS BURKE: Sorry, would that need an audit of the current service or do you know?

Ms Bennett: We would, yes. Yes, it would need an audit of the current service and it would also require a fair bit of selling with the SAAP sector, I would say. However, what we are looking to do also is to improve the data collection and the amount of information that we have. Honestly, the conversation began today. We had a meeting with someone from the department who certainly was open to the possibility that the CEAS service could in fact be expanded to be able to provide the kinds of thoughts that we are having about being the one point of entry to the service.

MRS BURKE: Excellent. It has been a problem, hasn't it, in the past that people don't know where to go?

Ms Bennett: It is a tremendous problem. Prior to the CEAS service being put in place by the ACT government, callers to our crisis line would be given six or eight phone

numbers and wished good luck, and now, at least, what we are able to do is to say to callers that there is or there is not a bed available for someone with their needs. At the moment, we are able to do that. Unfortunately, as I said, in a six-month period we turned away 913 people because there was no accommodation available for them that night. So there are certainly some efficiencies that need to be achieved.

MS PORTER: I have two questions, but one is just a supplementary. It is with regard to the new arrangements, the new priority, the different ways that ACT Housing is dealing with that. Do you think that that will free up some crisis accommodation, or have you noticed yet whether that has to do with the transitional beds and those kinds of things?

Ms Bennett: We haven't noticed anything yet. It is a relatively new improvement in the way they are dealing with people.

MS PORTER: That was my first question. The second one is with regard to indexation. It was my impression of the budget that that was across all the grants.

Ms Bennett: I have no reason to believe we won't get it. I simply haven't heard anything about getting it. We've had no indication that we won't be getting it. Indexation really only keeps us apace with cost increases. Of course, our particular circumstance is that we are in rented accommodation and we have for five years an agreement with a set amount that our rent is going up. Sometimes that is more than indexation and at other times it is less, but mostly it is more than indexation. Of course, we are not even keeping pace with those increases in costs. We had a 17 per cent increase today in power and that will have to be met. We run power 24 hours a day just with lights, heating and cooling for our telephone counsellors. So we would expect a fairly big hit on that. I don't believe that indexation is going to cover those costs.

MS PORTER: Of those areas that you spoke to Mrs Burke about before, the areas that you told us in answer to her question for which you are currently funded and how much you are funded, in which ones, apart from CEAS, which you believe there may be some capacity to expand, do you believe you most urgently need some assistance?

Ms Bennett: We most urgently need assistance with the crisis counselling line, most urgently. At the moment, we have three crisis lines. We are about to increase that to five because we have been able to increase the recruitment and retention of volunteers. At the moment, I have two full-time staff who work with the 200 telephone counsellors that we have. Lifeline Australia figures suggest that for every 70 volunteers you need to have one full-time person there to provide the support and administrative requirements that they have and the supervision needs that they have. We currently have two staff serving 200 telephone counsellors. It is our desire and our intent over the next three years to increase that to a TC body of 300.

So I am already operating one staff down. By the time I get to 300 I am going to be needing four or five staff members. I've got to pay for them; that's my desperate need. We can do more. We can answer more calls. We will do so, and it would be great to get some support from the government in doing that. We are working very hard to be able to pay for it ourselves. As I said to Mr Stefaniak, we only get 30 per cent of our

funding from the government now. We raise 60 per cent. We raise \$400,000 a year to keep our telephone counselling going. If we have to raise more, then I guess that's what we will do, we will work harder in that area, but it would be nice to get some support and some additional funding for that area.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming in this afternoon. We will get a copy of the transcript to you as soon as we can and also any questions on notice. Once again, thanks very much. Have a lovely weekend.

Ms Bennett: My pleasure.

The committee adjourned at 6.04 pm.