



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, AGEING,
COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

(Reference: [Annual and financial reports 2013-2014](#))

Members:

DR C BOURKE (Chair)
MR A WALL (Deputy Chair)
MS Y BERRY
MS N LAWDER

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2014

Secretary to the committee:
Mrs N Kosseck (Ph: 620 50435)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.30 am.

Appearances:

Barr, Mr Andrew, Deputy Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Economic Development, Minister for Housing and Minister for Tourism and Events

Community Services Directorate

Howson, Ms Natalie, Director-General

Matthews, Mr David, Executive Director, Housing and Community Services

Collett, Mr David, Executive Coordinator, Public Housing Renewal Taskforce

Duggan, Mr Frank, Senior Director, Housing and Community Services

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

Nicol, Mr David, Under Treasurer

Bailey, Mr Daniel, Director, ACT Property Group

THE CHAIR: Welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services inquiry into the annual and financial reports for 2013-14. Today the committee will be examining the following components of the Community Services Directorate annual report: housing, concessions and community facilities. Minister and officials, could I confirm that you have read the privileges card lying on the table before you?

Mr Barr: Yes.

THE CHAIR: You understand the privileges implications of the statement?

Mr Barr: Yes, we do.

THE CHAIR: Before we proceed to questions, minister, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Barr: No, thank you. I am happy to proceed to questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, minister. If we turn to page 66 under “Housing”, could you tell us what you have learnt from the evaluation of the affordable rental scheme and the new rent setting model, please?

Mr Barr: Mr Matthews will assist.

Mr Matthews: The affordable rental scheme was an innovation that was introduced as part of our housing stimulus program. Over the past few years what we have been seeking to do is provide a range of different housing tenures and housing options for people in the social housing system more broadly. The affordable rental office currently has 28 properties and 27 tenants, and they are located at a number of our older persons sites. The objective behind the affordable rental scheme is to provide a below-market rate but not a public housing 25 per cent of income rate. So it is very much based on people’s affordability and capacity to pay.

After the implementation of this model what we wanted to make sure was that we had got those rent settings right and that people were able to sustain their tenure and pay an appropriate amount of rent for their circumstances. As a result of that review work we altered the way that the rental broad bands worked for the scheme to be able to provide more transparency and clarity about the different rental rates and what income level would justify tenants being at those different rental rates. Essentially, they were the lessons that we learned and gained from that review, and they represent a continuing commitment to look at different models of housing support and making sure that we can address affordability and sustainability.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry.

MS BERRY: I wondered, minister, if you could give us an update on how Common Ground is going.

Mr Barr: Yes. The construction is progressing well. I hope for a milestone event and a public acknowledgement of that milestone event in the near future. The completion dates are within a few weeks of what we had originally anticipated. There was some impact on the project by a weather event, as I understand it. But we are expecting it within a reasonable time frame of the initial expectation.

Obviously all construction projects are subject to some variability around weather and availability of tradespeople and the like at certain times. We will, as I understand, be in a position to provide some further information on a finalised date and have an appropriate ceremony and give recognition of the significant contribution of Liz Dawson to the advocacy of that project. We will also give some consideration to the appropriate recognition of her role. Natalie will give some further detail on exact time frames.

Ms Howson: The Common Ground project is progressing. In fact, I met with one of the partners yesterday, Northside Community Service, and we were discussing their perspective on progression towards the completion of that project. Certainly in terms of their engagement in the operating model and working with Argyle, the housing provider in that project partnership, there was a very positive response to the way that a range of issues are progressing in readiness for identifying appropriate tenants and moving them into that process.

The other thing that was really very encouraging to hear from the sector was excellent feedback on the engagement of Health in the preparation of the operating model for the service support system that will be in place for tenants that are invited to come into Common Ground. As you know, it is particularly targeting people that have had enormous difficulty in sustaining tenancies and have been in the homeless sector for long periods. The service model around Common Ground addresses that particular target group.

The actual facility, which David Collett may be able to talk a bit more about, will also be accommodating affordable renters. We will have a good mix of tenants in that context, which, again, is part of the success of the Common Ground model.

As the minister has indicated, we have had a couple of issues with some of the

materials that need to be prefabricated for the construction of Common Ground, which have related to weather events and other things, but we are working very closely with the construction company to pick up any of the slack that we have lost. And our expectation is that we will be opening Common Ground in the new year.

MS BERRY: I asked this last time. It is Argyle who will be managing the place?

Ms Howson: That is correct.

MS BERRY: We talked last time about having the sort of system that will be used to manage the place, a concierge kind of system rather than a security kind of system. Have you got an update on any information about that, about where that is at the moment, or is it just a matter of waiting until it is built and then putting in those processes?

Ms Howson: No, those particular features are important elements of the Common Ground process. David, are you able to talk to the specifics in planning around that?

Mr Matthews: Yes. The Common Ground model is both, of course, a suitable built form and a suitable service delivery model. There has been a lot of work go into the design of the model to make sure that it provides a good living experience for both the affordable and the social housing renters. But really, I guess the day-to-day manifestation of the Common Ground approach will be how Argyle Community Housing and Northside Community Service work together to provide a supportive tenancy model. Having the expertise of Argyle Community Housing from their work in New South Wales but also with our older persons site in Conder will be vital, as is the expertise that Northside Community Service bring to the table from the vast array of community services they provide in Canberra.

Those services are working very closely together. Recently they have finalised a deed of operation which ensures that there are very clear roles and responsibilities about how those tenancy and support functions work together, and we are very confident that they have got a very strong relationship that they will bring to the delivery of that.

We all recognise that the establishment phase will be very important. It is a new site. There will be new tenants moving in for the first time. There has already been considerable work put into the planning of that establishment phase, how tenants will be brought in, how we will support a good mix on site and how we will make sure that there is no distinction in day-to-day living between the affordable renters that are on site and the social housing tenants. Essentially, that is all very much wrapped up in the broader Common Ground model. We have obviously lent on and learned extensively from the experience in other states and territories—which also has been taken down into that working relationship between Argyle and Northside Community Service.

MS LAWDER: I have a supplementary. Minister, when Minister Rattenbury was Minister for Housing, at the estimates hearings in the middle of the year he said that Common Ground had to be completed by December 2014 under the national partnership agreement funding. Are you are confident it will be completed or do the weather events get you an extension in some way?

Mr Barr: My understanding is that the project is still within the requirements of the commonwealth and that the delays, although regrettable, are going to impact on a relatively minor scale. We are talking weeks, handfuls of weeks, not a significantly extended period. As Ms Howson indicated, the construction company is working diligently to make up for some of the lost time.

THE CHAIR: That national homelessness partnership agreement was extended by the commonwealth, was it not?

Ms Howson: This is actually the NRAS agreement that is associated with that particular deadline or that time frame around December. But as the minister said, the issues with the commonwealth are being managed. I think they are mainly concerned about projects that are not underway under that program at the moment. This project is definitely underway and it is just a matter of constant communication with the commonwealth around our progress. I think David Collett might comment on this but Argyle are managing that communication. Do you want to say something about that, David?

Mr Collett: Certainly. The funding agreement with the commonwealth originally set out the completion date of December. There were two aspects to the commonwealth funding. Firstly there was the capital funding agreement, which we have already drawn down and expended. The second one was NRAS funding for the first 10 years of operation both for the affordable renters and for the people coming out of primary homelessness.

As Ms Howson has just indicated, the commonwealth are most concerned about projects that have been delayed significantly, have not started or have been subject to significant change in terms of location and what have you. There is provision for formally varying the contract with the commonwealth. We, through Argyle housing, have formally varied the contract and we are within the current completion date agreement with the commonwealth. We will continue to keep them informed.

THE CHAIR: I will ask a supplementary there too. Minister, the commonwealth seem to be regularly attacking the NRAS from a variety of different angles since they came to office. Perhaps you could give us a broader view of the state of the scheme. And are we still getting benefit for ACT residents, apart from this Common Ground project?

Mr Barr: It would appear that the bulk of the commonwealth's commentary has been in relation to universities taking up the scheme. I guess there is a view that prevails around international students accessing university places through government subsidised places through this scheme.

In the context of the future of the scheme and future rounds of funding, the principal issue of concern from the commonwealth is in relation to universities accessing to the extent that they have in the ACT, in fact, driven, I guess, by the territory receiving more than its population share of NRAS places. Obviously the opportunities that have presented themselves here in the ACT have addressed some affordability issues that have been associated with the university student market that has traditionally impacted upon Canberra's broader rental market, with a new crop of students arriving

each year. They have tended to have to compete in the housing market with the round of public service graduate recruits who come into the city as well.

It is fair to say that the impact of commonwealth job cuts within the graduate programs has not been as significant as in the past, and the combination of the NRAS places, supported through the universities, and the changes to the commonwealth graduate recruitment has eased a bit of the pressure in the Canberra rental market.

Whilst the commonwealth's criticism of elements of the NRAS program might be valid in some other jurisdictions, I think they are less so in the ACT. The program has had the desired effect in terms of providing housing options for students, in particular, and has eased pressure in the broader Canberra rental market.

On balance, whilst new programs of this nature that are focusing on a targeted market intervention always need to be evaluated and assessed as to whether they are achieving the outcomes that were intended in the design phase, I think, by and large, NRAS has worked well in the ACT. If there is to be a focus away from the support for universities, there still needs to be, in my view anyway, if we are to grow our higher education sector, not just locally but nationally, enhanced student accommodation in the university sector. If the commonwealth changes the focus of NRAS, there is still going to be a need in that university sector.

Mind you, there are a range of other reform proposals that the commonwealth are putting forward that might well dampen demand for access to universities, with \$100,000 degrees and the like, but that is a conversation for another hearing, I think.

THE CHAIR: But that is not going to dampen overseas student demand, is it, because they are already paying those significant fees?

Mr Barr: Not for international students but for domestic students, and that is a significant market into the ACT—people who come from around Australia to study at the ANU and University of Canberra in particular.

THE CHAIR: Ms Lawder, a substantive question.

MS LAWDER: Minister, on page 68 of volume 1 it says that you have committed to an independent evaluation of the homelessness sector in 2014-15. Could you explain a bit more about the evaluation? Has it begun? What form will it take?

Mr Barr: Ms Howson or David.

Ms Howson: The evaluation for the homelessness services is underway. I will turn to David to take you through the detail, Ms Lawder, but while he is finding his notes, I can tell you that we have commissioned, through a select tender, a provider to undertake that evaluation. The scope of the evaluation has clearly been agreed. The evaluation has commenced and we expect to see a draft report towards the end of February or early March next year. The whole purpose of that evaluation is to assess the impact of the significant reforms that have been undertaken in that sector over the last few years.

Mr Matthews: Just to add to Ms Howson's answer, I was pleased to actually chair the first meeting of the evaluation working group just two days ago. That evaluation working group includes representatives of the non-government sector. The Youth Coalition of the ACT, Northside Community Service and St Vincent de Paul are all represented on that group.

We met with the successful consultants and had a good initiation meeting. That is ARTD; they are the consulting firm that have been successful in winning that evaluation tender for us. They have recently done quite extensive work with the New South Wales government around their changes, as well as previously with the Queensland and Tasmanian governments; they are very knowledgeable about the developments and reform activities of all states and territories.

The commitment was made in last year's budget for \$150,000 for this independent evaluation. Very importantly, it is looking back at our journey since 2009. The purpose of the evaluation is to investigate the impact of those reforms since that period. Just to refresh the committee's memory, that was very much around the time of some increased activity from the Australian government through the white paper on homelessness, the subsequent work around the stimulus and nation building package and some set targets which were identified about reducing homelessness nationally.

The ACT had already started a significant process of reform way back since 2003 in the breaking the cycle homelessness strategy that the government had sponsored. It has been quite a journey that we have walked, with our sector alongside, hand in hand, collaboratively, reforming our service delivery and seeking to improve outcomes.

As well as that reform process, we will look backwards in terms of 2009; we will also be looking at what the future policy implications are and how we should be shaping our homelessness system going forward.

The time line for completion of the review is April 2015. There are discrete milestones that will take place between now and then, including the provision of a draft report, which Ms Howson referred to. The evaluation will include a desktop of the relevant literature, a lot of key informant interviews, and an analysis of all of the data which is publicly available. The evaluation will also be based around five case studies to look at particular system elements that have been reformed since 2009 and what we have learnt from that process.

MS LAWDER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Minister, the new human services gateway lists a range of services now available at Nature Conservation House at Belconnen, in my electorate. Has that involved moving staff or services there?

Mr Barr: Yes. There has been co-location of a range of services, including a new partnership with the Real Estate Institute, supported by Allhomes, for an information kiosk that is now part of that shopfront that we were able to launch with the Real Estate Institute just this week. It provides access to information on all affordable rental properties in the private market in Canberra. It is a very user-friendly interface that allows people to search, by region and different property types, effectively all of

the capability of the Allhomes website available in a really simplified way. People who are looking for a range of different housing options have all of that access there and then.

There are a number of other community service providers who are also providing a range of complementary services within the facility. It presents very well and in a different form from how people might traditionally expect government shopfront operations to be delivered. I made an observation to Mr Matthews at the time—I am not sure he took it that well—that it reminds me of a very modern bank. You walk in; there is a concierge there to greet you and ascertain the nature of the services you require; then you are guided appropriately, in a very appropriate, modern, relaxed setting that is a whole lot different from queuing for counters and staff behind glass walls and all the rest. It reflects a much more contemporary service delivery model and allows for the delivery of a really wide range of services.

That represents the future of ACT government service delivery, and more broadly reflects the direction for that complete human services wraparound service delivery, and then fits quite well into the broader service transformation agenda that is running across the entire ACT public service. My observation, having worked in a number of different areas of ACT government as minister over a period of time, is that some other areas of government could benefit from having a look at the breadth, nature and quality of services that are provided at the gateway.

Would anyone like to add anything further?

Ms Howson: I would like to give Mr Duggan the opportunity to make some comments. Mr Duggan has overseen the implementation of this flagship initiative under the human services blueprint. He can talk about some of the other services that are available, particularly the partnership we have struck with the National Disability Insurance Agency.

Mr Duggan: The question of agency involvement in this project has been quite significant. We have a range of agencies from Belconnen Community Service, the YWCA, First Point, the Sustainable Tenancies Service and the children, youth and family support program.

As the minister has described, we do have a concierge who actually provides a fairly significant role in screening. They will screen people as they enter the one human services gateway. Where it is a universal assessment, with our universal screening that tells us that people are here simply to look for advice on housing, we defer often to that area. If, however, there are other issues that people present with, either through the first screening or through, in the case of housing, we will start looking at what their particular needs are. If it is a homeless issue, it goes to First Point. If it is a tenancy debt issue, we may have the initial conversations and then it is referred off to Kerr Financial, who are actually present. And the specialists will look at more tertiary intervention.

In that space, we have also now been able to do a fairly significant piece of work on case coordination. We have our staff come out, engage with people or any of the members of the gateway, look at the particular needs that are being presented and then

continue with the functions of case coordination to make sure the services are not just there but are available to people to be more sustainable.

The other issue that is of particular importance is that with the sector we are now developing a common info exchange program where we undertake a common assessment framework and specifically seek your needs. We then get permission to actually share that information. We now have a live system that we hope to implement in the next couple of months which allows us to case manage or case coordinate you with a range of broader agencies so we can continue to have live intervention with people moving forward.

THE CHAIR: What sort of staff training has been involved to get your shopfront up to that point?

Mr Duggan: We have a significant training program through the directorate itself. In this particular area, we have just finished our first induction training of all the participants. We had all the agencies turn up. We worked through our common assessment framework, which is a tool that every member of staff, from either a government or non-government area, implements and utilises. We are also now developing a full suite of training into the future which will look at all their needs about how to deal with conflict, how to case manage particular clients, et cetera. That program has been developed by the participants.

THE CHAIR: One of the keys to the human services blueprint, plus also strengthening vulnerable families, is devolution of decision-making down to caseworkers. Could you talk us through that, please?

Mr Duggan: The decision-making process is built around a supervision framework too. Housing, for example, has introduced a fairly significant framework around supervision and decision-making processes in that arena. Each of these agencies can also come in with their own agency training programs. In that spectrum, we have an allocation meeting and a supervision program. For each of the cases that come in that need a secondary level of service, we have an allocations meeting, and the decision-making processes are confirmed within that arena.

THE CHAIR: Minister, you talked about an Allhomes booth in the shopfront. Obviously that is a fairly bright and well-marketed piece of information. How does that compare with the kind of information that is provided for clients of Housing ACT about the properties that are available with Housing ACT?

Mr Barr: It probably sets a benchmark.

Ms Howson: That is a very good question.

Mr Barr: Yes, it is. It is a good point. As we seek to upgrade systems and the consumer interface, the client interface, it presents a pretty good model. It really is a very easy-to-use, flexible system that provides quite detailed information about available properties and the like. There is going to be some difference, obviously, between a private rental market facility and one within a public housing portfolio, given the different allocative natures of access to properties, with one being entirely

market based and based on capacity to pay and another essentially being a rationed system, as it has to be. But the idea that information could be available in that format or a similar format is not a bad idea; it is something we will examine.

THE CHAIR: If your only competitive point is price and availability, that does, perhaps you might agree, tend to affect human psychology, about the values that they place on the placement.

Mr Barr: Yes, that is true, but to the extent that the way we undertake a housing offering and give opportunities for a degree of discretion within the allocation process. But it is an entitlement-based system, with properties of a certain size depending on the number of people being housed. There is preference for regional locations in the context of the private rental market; you could drill down to a particular street if that is your desire. And if you do not want to rent anywhere else but street X in suburb Y, you can simply wait until a property becomes available. That opportunity is not going to be there to the same extent. The interesting question really is about whether that will streamline our own internal processes and give a greater level of efficiency in the allocation process. I think that should be explored.

THE CHAIR: Have you had much feedback from clients about this new type of interface?

Mr Barr: It has only been a couple of days since it was revealed.

THE CHAIR: Possibly shock if they walk in and someone fronts them up at the front desk.

Mr Duggan: It was interesting on the day, minister. As you left, there were at least three gentlemen that David engaged who were queuing up to use the kiosk. We have had very good feedback about the utilisation of the kiosk. People have found it very user-friendly. The very fact that it is screen based and that it is touch based—people have engaged with that very quickly. We also have the Sustainable Tenancies Service, who are part of the gateway service. That is part of their work. They maintain a presence around the kiosk on occasions. They engage people and say: “You’ve now sought a property. You’re now going into the private rental market.” Part of their program is called “Housing options”. They then work with the person about what the different financial situation will be if they engage in rental property. They talk them through what they may need by way of references and they engage them about some opportunities around the rental bond scheme, which we also make available to applicants in that space.

The additional issue in this space is where the Real Estate Institute of the ACT have been working very strongly with their agents and encouraging them to understand the system, where it is and how to replicate and involve clients as they come through the process.

Mr Matthews: Dr Bourke, going back to the minister’s earlier comments about the design of the shopfront, one of the key elements is that we have provided as much capability for the clients to self-manage their own needs as possible. There are a lot of resources that are available in the shopfront. In addition to the kiosk, people can use

computers; they can use phones; they can be supported to access, for example, information about employment services and the provision of things like financial counselling. They are really given a lot of resources and tools to be able to address a wide range of their needs.

We want to enable that as much as possible. Some people need a greater level of support in accessing that than others. But from the feedback since we have established the shopfront, some people have been delighted that they can just come in, do their own business and really get out and get on with their lives—or not have to come into the shopfront at all but communicate with us in different ways. They are the avenues that we want to continue to keep exploring in future to improve our service delivery and give our clients different options about the way they can access our services.

THE CHAIR: For instance, you have a broad suite of programs under affordable housing assistance. Presumably, this is how they are going to be able to get information and help to manage that?

Mr Matthews: That is exactly right, Dr Bourke. We want to make available all of that information to people accessing the shopfronts so that they fully understand the range of options they have. When you walk into a housing shopfront, there is something of a mental mindset that you are going to put in an application form and get on the list. Of course, we can support people to do that as well, but we also want to say to them that there are these other options that are available to them, whether it be affordable housing through community housing Canberra, or other community housing providers, or whether it be a requirement to help with things like financial counselling and employment assistance. People are getting much more than an experience of just walking into a shopfront, putting in their application for housing and leaving. We want to really inform our clients as much as possible about the resources that are available to them and really support their access to that if they do need that additional assistance.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry, a substantive question.

MS BERRY: I am interested in the consultation that has been happening with public housing tenants along Northbourne Avenue. Could you give us an update on that and what plans there are for future consultation with those individuals?

Mr Barr: I will hand over for some more detail to officials but, more broadly, it is important to recognise that the transition on Northbourne Avenue will take an extended period of time. I have been at pains to stress that this is not going to happen in one year or even in five. The housing minister in 2025 will still be involved in a change management process around our ageing multi-unit properties. The overall portfolio and the level of new housing that we can construct in any given year, the size of the overall portfolio and the pace with which the ACT housing market can absorb that level of change dictate that this is a decade-plus-long process of reform.

For most tenants along Northbourne Avenue, there will be no substantive change in the short term. Obviously, for a small number initially, particularly associated with the Dickson flats redevelopment site, that change was reasonably quick and was managed effectively. I think there are some important lessons that we can learn from that

process—what went well and where we might seek to improve in the future. What I found interesting in that process was the locational choices that those tenants then pursued beyond just the inner north. There was a very strong desire to be in other locations.

As we move forward through this reform program, I want it to be measured to ensure that we are able to construct the replacement housing. There is a detailed planning process that is underway. The omnibus territory plan variation process really is setting up a pipeline for a decade. That change management process is going to be confronting for some; for others it will be an opportunity to move to somewhere that is perhaps more suited to their needs—closer to family, closer to employment, closer to education facilities, for example. So there will be a mixture of responses from tenants. We need to be sensitive to that and sensitive to management of the process. But a fundamental issue for me is to ensure that the new housing is constructed. We have to get that process right and to reassure people that this process will take some time, so that they do not need to worry that they are going to be asked to move in the next month, the next year, and possibly even in the next five years for some.

MS BERRY: I guess that is why the consultation is so important for those people.

Mr Barr: Yes, that is correct. But at a higher level, in terms of what people see reported in the media and the understanding that colleagues have here in the Assembly, it is important to continue to reinforce that point. We have, through Mr Collett, a significant process of engagement with the broader community around the new sites that are being identified, and through the rest of the team in Housing we have a very close collaboration with tenants and with the various stakeholder groups who have a representative focus here. Again, it is calm, it is measured and it is a longer term approach. Natalie, would you like to make a comment?

Ms Howson: I might make a couple of comments and also ask Mr Duggan to talk specifically about the process that is happening along Northbourne Avenue. Certainly, out of the process with the Dickson towers, we have looked to mature our approach to engagement with tenants. You are absolutely right, Ms Berry; that challenge around the longevity of this process and appropriate consultation has to be well managed, as well as an appreciation of the dynamic of Housing ACT as the landlord and our relationship with tenants as opposed to the relationship they might have with other support and advocacy agencies.

We have established stakeholder interest groups that are advising us and helping us work with our tenants along the Northbourne Avenue corridor. We have a very positive partnership with those organisations and they are keeping us honest in that context of saying, “Now is the time to come back and talk to tenants. We’re hearing that they’re still confused or a little unsure of what’s happening next.” We are working very hard to make sure that when there is media exposure on particular issues we re-engage with tenants and clarify what is going on in a way that is easily accessible and understandable from their point of view. Frank, would you like to talk about the committee and the work you are doing with them?

Mr Duggan: We have a governance group which we have called the linking into new communities group. The participants in that are ACT Shelter, the Tenants Union,

Canberra Men's Centre, YWCA, Northside Community Service, ACTCOSS and the Youth Coalition. In that space we are developing a governance group to examine what the proposed needs of folks will be in the community.

Below that group we have an operational group. They will be the people who will actually be engaging face to face with tenants. They will be made up of representatives of that group, plus we will have two designated housing managers who will specialise in this process going forward.

Our intention is to look at doing individual tenant assessments. We did a piece of that work at Dickson towers. Subsequently we were able to place people and meet their needs. There were only two folks from that relocation that wanted to actually remain in the inner north. The rest utilised the opportunity to discuss with us what their primary needs were. A lot of that was around either employment opportunities, so that they wanted to live nearer to those, or they wanted to reside closer to families. So we had a dispersal right across Canberra.

We will do an individual assessment based on that. We will look at age cohort, ethnicity and services used, and build a picture of what people's needs are and also seek from them what would be their primary location and what would be their primary needs moving forward. From that process we will then develop a plan of action about how we actually decant and relocate people moving forward.

The third strategy that we are trying to work on and start to talk to our agencies about is getting a residents group, where it is applicable, to work with us on a more collective approach on what their needs are, so that they will feel more empowered to have those discussions with us.

MS BERRY: With the conversations that you have been having with people at Dickson and with other public housing tenants along Northbourne and in the flats across the road, will they be reflected in the kind of new and renewed public housing stock that will be available? Obviously, you will have learned a lot of information from individuals' needs, demographics and ethnicity.

Mr Matthews: Very much, Ms Berry. Obviously with the public housing renewal program we are looking at a whole-of-portfolio improvement. We need to take this opportunity to structurally realign our portfolio to our needs to get the requirements of the waiting list reflected in the available stock that we have, to reduce the overall age and to increase the overall energy efficiency. We also want to specifically provide an outcome for all of our current tenants that are in those localities. We will be very much using that process of tenant engagement and our understanding of those tenants and their history to identify the replacement stock that we will be building as part of that overall redevelopment program.

Obviously, by necessity, it will not be a direct one-for-one replacement because we will want to, within the context of overall portfolio renewal, make sure that we have the right mix going forward. But what we can do and what we will do is make sure that we have a suitable housing option for each of those tenants based on that engagement.

We have been successful in doing that to date. Obviously, the scale of what we will be doing will be increasing, so there will be some challenges in being able to continue to do that going forward. But that is absolutely our commitment. We want to make sure that where tenants relocate to as a result of this work suits their needs and will be their home for the next period of time and meet their full range of needs—and, particularly with our ageing tenants, to make sure that there is an ability to put people in adaptable and accessible properties so that they can stay in those properties and not have to move again as they get older.

THE CHAIR: Ms Lawder, we can move along to output class 3.1, if you have no housing questions. We might move along, and change officials. Officials, could you confirm that you have read the privilege card that is on the table before you?

Mr Nicol: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Do you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Nicol: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Ms Lawder.

MS LAWDER: Is there any change predicted or planned for the ACT taxi subsidy scheme given the new flexible bus service that is being trialled, or do you see them as completely separate target groups?

Mr Barr: We did have an increase in the level of rebate available in the scheme. That was in the last budget or the budget before last?

Mr Nicol: The last budget.

Mr Barr: That provided for some greater flexibility within that scheme. We will consider the issue in the context of changes that have occurred elsewhere and make a decision probably associated with the next budget.

MS LAWDER: Are you going to have a formal review?

Mr Barr: I would not think it would be necessary to have a formal review, depending on what your definition of “formal review” is. We can certainly examine the issues and seek some input and advice. I do not want to spend a huge amount of time or money on going to a consultant or anything like that. But we will certainly look at the issues.

Mr Nicol: Whilst we are not undertaking a formal review of the taxi subsidy per se, we are undertaking a review of the concessions program. I suspect we will touch on the taxi subsidy in that review but it is only one small element of the entire program. So it will get as much scrutiny as it warrants.

THE CHAIR: I will ask a supplementary. With the advent of programs like Uber, how is that going to affect potentially a taxi subsidy scheme if it was indeed legal in the ACT?

Mr Barr: An interesting question. It is early days. I do not know. I will need to have a think about it.

THE CHAIR: I will leave that with you on notice.

Mr Barr: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, minister. Also on concessions, with the targeted assistance website which was a recommendation of the 2012 targeted assistance strategy, how has that been proceeding and received?

Mr Nicol: That is not run by us. I think that is run by our colleagues in CSD.

Mr Barr: It is. I can make some high level observations. The availability and co-location of all of that information were well received. The number of hits on that particular page have been very significant given the level of publicity associated with its presence. You could make the observation that some of the increases in demand or accessing of particular concessions within the overall concessions program seemed to coincide with the availability of that additional information. We provided through supplementary appropriations and increases in budget allocations increased funding for the concessions program. I think it is reasonable to presume that that level of increased awareness around the availability of a range of those concessions is linked to the increase in demand.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry, a substantive question.

MS BERRY: Are you doing the no-interest loan schemes?

Mr Nicol: We are not aware of it.

Mr Barr: The operation of the concessions program and some policy work around how that will look in the future has transitioned out of Community Services into CMTEDD within the revenue area. The rationale for that was that it consolidates within one area of government the bulk of the financial transactions between residents and the territory government. There are certain efficiencies and a better level of data and information that is available and held within the Revenue Office that will allow us to better target our concession programs and to ensure that there is that whole-of-government approach to our policy development and also our practical rollout of those assistance programs. There are a number of individual previously budget-funded initiatives that remain with the particular directorates that had responsibility at that time. From memory, the one you have raised is still with CSD, with the Minister for Community Services.

MS BERRY: I do not have any questions, then. Thank you for providing that answer.

MS LAWDER: I am happy to move on to the next section.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we can keep moving along. We might do concessions and community facilities together.

Mr Barr: By way of explanation of administrative change, again, with respect to the community facilities that were previously managed within the Community Services portfolio, when I was community services minister we began a process of assessing where it was best in government for the ongoing management of community facilities to be located, given we have that capability within the Property Group. It made sense to continue to consolidate towards one asset manager within ACT government. So a process of transition has been occurring. Mr Bailey and his team now have responsibility for a significant portion of community facilities that were previously managed within this directorate but now sit with the Property Group within the CMTEDD portfolio.

THE CHAIR: Mr Bailey appeared before another committee the other day and answered questions on this topic. You can imagine that it does get a little bit—

Mr Barr: Yes. The changes were made to align with the new financial year. Of course, we are looking back at the previous period. Mr Collett, who previously had responsibility in this area, is also with us. This is the second time that we have had questions in this area but with a slightly different committee—although with the members there seems to be a lot of overlap. It is a small parliament with a small number of ministers.

THE CHAIR: We have got some clarity there. Ms Lawder, your question?

MS LAWDER: I am not sure if I am asking the right people anymore: are you able to tell me how many buildings are currently held by the government as community facilities?

Mr Barr: Yes, we should be able to do that. We may need to take it on notice to get the exact number.

Mr Bailey: We have had 61 transferred from community facilities just recently. I am not quite sure of the total number. ACT Property Group manages just over 200 properties now, which is a mix of community and commercial office buildings and land. We are the largest holder of community properties within the government, but there are still other areas—sport and rec, Health or even JACS—that still have community tenants. But at this stage we have the majority of them, and hopefully we can implement a model that will work and that can be rolled out from there.

MS LAWDER: Once again, you may not be the right person or directorate, but I was interested in the cost of repairs and maintenance of government-held facilities for the 2013-14 year.

Mr Bailey: I understand that with the community facilities that came over, they spent around \$2 million on repairs and maintenance. ACT Property Group has a rolling program as well and we self-fund the majority of repairs and maintenance within the portfolio. The ACT Property Group is a fee-for-service business. It does fund a lot of the repairs and maintenance internally out of our budget. We get appropriation for large capital works. I can take on notice the total of what we have spent on just the community facilities and combine it with that.

MS LAWDER: I did notice that tenant satisfaction was reasonably low for tenants in the old Kippax health centre and that kind of thing. What kind of survey do you do and what are the reasons for that low satisfaction level?

Mr Collett: It is worth bearing in mind that many of the community facilities that are provided are in surplus buildings. The buildings in some cases may have been schools, depots or other facilities. So there is a combination of issues. We started a process which has been continued by Property Group of improving those facilities in terms of the building fabric, the insulation, the effectiveness, the roofs and those elements that need attention in an ageing building. But there is always the challenge of it not being designed specifically for the community tenants—their being fitted into classrooms or administration areas in schools, for instance, or into depots.

We initiated a program of upgrading those buildings. In addition to the maintenance funds that were expended there were also capital grants for a range of improvements to those buildings. We were successful in attracting commonwealth funding of approximately \$3 million to undertake energy upgrades to many of the buildings as well. They were able to not only look at more efficient lighting, energy controls and management of the buildings but also they were able to address some of the accommodation and building fabric issues that impacted on the tenants—things like roof repairs, improving insulation, shading windows and the like.

MS LAWDER: Have you found and had to remediate any asbestos in any of those facilities?

Mr Collett: During the period in which we were managing those facilities there was no incidence of loose asbestos. Many of the buildings, of course, have bonded asbestos in sheet material in the usual areas of eaves linings and substratas for tiling areas, both on walls and on floors. Of course, through our practices and standards around managing asbestos in buildings, we have ensured that the appropriate plans are in place so that the maintenance contractors, in particular, are fully aware of their responsibilities in that area and that all work is carried out consistently with regulations.

MS BERRY: I have a supplementary. Were you saying that the facilities that are currently still under JACS or sport and rec will eventually be coming over to you?

Mr Bailey: No, I do not think there is a plan to do that. We have the majority of the community tenants, but there are some that do not fit neatly into any sort of portfolio and they may well remain within their directorates going forward.

Mr Barr: There is a broader question around separating asset management from tenancy management, or sometimes combining them. There are historical reasons why particular tenancies are managed in particular portfolios. One of the underlying principles for the change in recent times has been to better consolidate the functions principally around asset management, where Property Group have a significant strength and where there is a desire from the government to be able to get a more consistent approach to the management of facilities as well.

We have circumstances where commercial operators are in government facilities and paying subsidised rents. There are community organisations in government facilities and paying commercial rents. There are 20 years of historical quirks, really, associated with this. So the broader challenge that we have is to transition over time to a more consistent framework that will see the rental subsidies applied in the appropriate context. Frankly, the commercial operations will ultimately have to transition to more market-based settings in order to maintain a competitive neutrality framework because they are often competing against other private sector entities who have to pay normal rents. Again this is not something that will happen overnight; it will be a transition, but it is one of the policy tasks that are before us.

MS BERRY: How many? Do you have a breakdown of the number of people who are commercial and community?

Mr Barr: That is part of the work that is underway. There are a wide variety of agreements that have been struck for a wide variety of reasons. Part of the challenge is that there were probably sound reasons for a particular arrangement being struck. It might have been at the time a government contribution to seek a social outcome through a commercial partner, but it is not entirely transparent if it is delivered by way of a subsidised rent. It might be more transparent to charge a full commercial rent but then actually have an appropriation that goes to a particular area for a particular social purpose, for example. So we need to do some further work. It was underway within the Community Services area, just focusing on those areas—those properties and those tenants. But it is now a broader piece of work, I think it would be fair to say. It will take some time and it will need to be managed when change is introduced over a period of a number of years, I would envisage.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, minister. We are going to adjourn. I would like to remind members that the committee has resolved that supplementary questions are to be lodged with the committee office within four business days of receipt of the proof transcript from this hearing. The committee asks that ministers respond within 10 working days of the receipt of those supplementary questions. Answers to questions taken on notice today are to be provided five business days after this hearing, with day one being the first business day after the question was taken.

The committee's hearing for today is adjourned. The committee's next public hearing on annual reports is at 1.30 pm on Monday, 15 December 2014, with the Minister for Health.

The committee adjourned at 10.31 am.