



DEBATES
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

DAILY HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

2 December 2025

This is an **EDITED PROOF TRANSCRIPT** of proceedings that is subject to further checking. Members' suggested corrections for the official *Weekly Hansard* should be lodged in writing with the Hansard office no later than **Tuesday, 20 January 2025**.

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Tuesday, 2 December 2025

The Assembly met at 10 am.

Resignation of Speaker

In accordance with standing order 11A, the Clerk informed members on 10 November 2025 of the resignation of the Speaker, Mr Parton, and tabled a copy of the correspondence.

Speaker—Resignation—Copy of email correspondence to the Clerk from the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, dated 10 November 2025.

Election of Speaker

The Clerk informed members of the requirement of standing order 11 that the Assembly now proceed to elect a Speaker and called for nominations.

MR PARTON (Brindabella) (10.00): I propose Mr Jeremy Hanson as the Speaker of the Assembly, and I move:

That Mr Hanson take the Chair of the Assembly as Speaker.

The Clerk: Does the member accept the nomination?

MR HANSON (Murrumbidgee) (10.00): I do.

The Clerk: Are there any further nominations?

There being no further proposal, I declare Mr Hanson, the member proposed, to have been elected as Speaker.

Mr Speaker having taken the chair—

MR SPEAKER (Mr Hanson) (10.01): Thank you.

Members, I have not sat here before, so it is a very different view, I must say, and I would like to thank you all very much for your support. I am genuinely humbled and honoured to accept this position. My commitment to you all is that I will be a dedicated, respectful and entirely non-partisan Speaker. It is not my intention to be an activist speaker or implement significant reforms. I think this Assembly is working very well and I think that is a great credit to the speakers that have come before me and the work of the OLA staff, led very ably by the Clerk.

I think it also functions as well as it does through the goodwill and professionalism of all of us as members. I would like to, at this stage, recognise that being a minister in this government with multiple portfolios in a minority government is important and very demanding work, as is being a government backbencher when there is only two of you. I understand how busy you are. I recognise, as well, that opposition is a very difficult task, as Mr Parton is about to find out, and it is made even more difficult by being out of government for so many years. It is a lonely, difficult job.

I would also like to recognise the crossbench and the independents. You have an equally challenging and important role in this place, particularly with minority government, and I recognise that you do so as crossbenchers and independents with scant resources; there are so few of you.

Now, my job is to find the balance in this place that ensures that each of us as members is able to perform our roles as parliamentarians as best we can, so that ultimately we all collectively provide vibrant democracy and good governance to the people of the ACT. Again, thank you members, and I apologise to you. It is my first time ever sitting in this chair, so I am a bit unversed in how this works. You will no doubt be very gentle with me, as I will be with you.

Leader of the Opposition

MR SPEAKER: I inform the Assembly that on 11 November 2025, Mr Cocks, as the opposition whip, advised that the Canberra Liberals had elected Mr Mark Parton MLA as their leader and he consented to being Leader of the Opposition. I therefore recognise Mr Parton, in accordance with standing order 5A, and table the correspondence from Mr Cocks:

Canberra Liberals change to leadership—Copy of email correspondence to the Clerk from the Opposition Whip, dated 10 November 2025.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (10.04): I seek leave to make a brief statement.

Leave granted.

MR PARTON: Thank you, members. I never expected to be occupying this seat in the chamber. It was never my plan. I want to thank Ms Castley and Mr Hanson for the work that they have done in the past 12 months to lay the foundation for the next three years and, of course, also congratulate Mr Hanson for his election as Speaker today.

Today, I stand before this Assembly deeply honoured to lead the Canberra Liberals and determined to chart a new course for our party and for the city, and it is a course that puts people first.

Members, can I tell you, I spoke to my wife on the day of the leadership vote for us a couple of weeks ago. It seems like about six months ago now. I spoke to her on the way in. She called me, and I answered. I was on Morshead Drive. She said, “How do you feel?” And I said, “To be honest, I feel sick. I feel like I want to go and vomit.” And she said, “Why?” And I said, “Well, I do not want to let people down. I just do not want to let people down.”

This is an enormous role. It is an enormous task, and I said to her—honestly, I said, “I fear that I am not up to the task.” She said to me, “You will give it the best that you can,” and I will. I certainly hope that is good enough. But again, I am not going to tell you stuff that is not true. I am going to concede that there are many moments when I have felt submerged in an ocean of self-doubt, and imposter syndrome has sort of

descended upon me. But more than anything else, I have a genuine love and respect for every member of this parliamentary team and a genuine belief that as a collective we can do great things together. I believe that we can, and I certainly trust their belief in me in getting me to this seat.

I also have a genuine respect for everyone in this chamber. It is interesting, as I have never viewed myself as the smartest person in the room. Looking around this room, I am not sure that I even make the top 10, to be honest. So in that regard, and echoing some of the words from the newly-minted Speaker, given the minority status of government and the situation that we have in this chamber, again, I would state that I have enormous respect for everybody sitting in this chamber, and that I understand there have certainly been many moments in the past 12 months and there will be many in the next three years when we have to form a consensus to get things done. I am certainly hoping to play a large role in that.

When I accepted the role, I asked myself a simple question: what is it that actually keeps Canberrans awake at night? It is not politics. It is not the stuff that goes on in here in terms of any bickering and arguing. It is everyday worries. It is the things that matter to most families, to mums and dads, to young people starting out. I think of a conversation I recently had with a mother in Calwell. She told me that she lies awake wondering how she will afford the next rates bill, whether her daughter will ever own a home and if her elderly father will get the surgery he needs before another winter passes. It is real life, and it is what matters, and that is what sadly, I think on a number of levels, this government has forgotten.

It is time to reclaim Canberra for the people in the suburbs, the families who work hard, pay their taxes and expect a fair go, because for too long this government has taken them for granted. It has saddled their children with intergenerational debt, delivered less-than services and infrastructure every year and treated housing as a revenue source rather than a right.

In simple terms, it now takes two full-time incomes just to keep a roof over your head in this city. Families are being forced out. Young people feel they will never achieve the dream of home ownership. I think a lot of that is because this government is a monopolistic, morally bankrupt property developer. I know that is a harsh statement—I get that. But I am stating my belief. Land in the ACT costs 20 per cent more than across the border. Rates and charges keep rising, and in just one year they introduced 25 new or higher taxes. It is not sustainable, it is not fair, and it is driving Canberrans to the brink.

If you need a GP, you wait. If you need emergency care, you wait. If you need elective surgery, you wait and wait and wait. This government's answer was a health levy that was to force taxpayers to pay for public health twice. Meanwhile, the ACT has the lowest number of ambulance officers per capita in the country. Our hospital system costs 17 per cent more to operate than the national average. Mr Speaker, my belief is that Canberrans deserve better. They deserve a health system that works, not one that costs more and delivers less.

Every Canberran should feel safe in their home, but under this government that is no longer the reality. On average, every single day in this city, 10 people are assaulted,

three cars are stolen and five homes or businesses are broken into. And what has the government done? It has failed to maintain adequate policing levels. It has opened the door to organised crime through a range of legislative change which has left us in a place where crime is much more likely. This is not the Canberra that we know, it is not the Canberra we want, and it is not the Canberra that we will accept.

The government are addicted to spending and Canberrans are paying the price. Today, the territory owes \$29 billion. One in every \$5 of revenue goes to just servicing that debt. And what do we get for it? We get failed projects, we get wasted millions and we get broken promises. They have spent millions on a ticketing system that does not work. They have tried to introduce electric fire trucks. They are cutting public service jobs to manage the budget crisis that they created. Every project costs more, takes longer and delivers less. That is the record and I think it is unacceptable.

The Canberra Liberals will deliver practical solutions, not ideology. We will listen to Canberrans. I am here to restore trust in government, essentially, because that is where we want to be: making housing affordable again, fixing our health system, keeping our streets safe, ending waste and restoring fiscal responsibility. We will stand up for the mums and dads who work hard every day, for the young people who deserve a future in this city and for the families who simply want a fair go. Canberrans deserve a government that respects them, values them and works for them, not against them. It is time for change. It is time for accountability. It is time to reclaim Canberra for the people.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (10.12), by leave: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Firstly, congratulations to you on your election to this role. I would say that of all the places I expected to see you, this was probably not on my bingo card at the beginning of this year, but I do certainly welcome the statements that you have made and the commitments that I know you have given across the chamber in seeking this role. We look forward to assisting you in being the best speaker you possibly can be, and we would seek to work constructively with you and under the terms of the agreement and the requests that we have put forward that I know you have agreed to. Good luck. My expectation is that question time will be slightly less rowdy, unless you intend to interject from the chair, which I would not encourage. Congratulations, Mr Speaker.

Congratulations to Mr Parton and Ms Morris on your election as Opposition Leader and as leaders of your party. It is a significant honour. Mr Parton, I recall having similar feelings back in 2014. Leadership is challenging and it is a role that you grow and evolve into over time. I think you are now the fifth person who has sat in that chair opposite me and there are a number in the chamber still. They all know the difficulties and challenges of leading, and in your instance, an alternative government in this place.

You have set out a combative terms of engagement for the next three years. For the government's part, we look forward to working constructively with you where we can. We will disagree where we must and we will seek to advance the territory's interests. In many of the issues that come before this chamber there is agreement across all members. For some there is not and that is part of a healthy democracy. We look forward to the next three years of this term. I wish you more luck—than you—in your roles, understandably, but it is a new chapter for the Assembly, and I am sure there are

many productive and important things that we can all do together that will make life better for Canberrans.

Petitions

The following petitions were lodged for presentation:

Sport and recreation—indoor facilities—petition 63-25

By Mr Emerson, from 709 residents:

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The following residents of the ACT draw to the attention of the Assembly to address the critical shortage of indoor sporting facilities in Canberra's northside. Exacerbated by the potential demolition of the Dickson Squash Courts, by investing in new, accessible indoor sports infrastructure (including squash courts) to promote community sport participation, health and recreation.

Your petitioners, therefore, request the Assembly to call on the ACT Government to address the critical shortage of indoor sporting facilities (including squash courts) in Canberra's Northside.

Pursuant to standing order 99A, the petition, having at least 500 signatories, was referred to the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation.

Drugs—drug-driving—medicinal cannabis—petition 46-25

By Mr Emerson, from 141 residents:

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The following residents of the ACT draw the attention of the Assembly to request that medicinal cannabis patients with a valid script no longer receive an automatic licence suspension if they are found to have tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in their system while driving. They also request that the ACT Government investigate how to test impairment levels, rather than solely relying on the presence of THC in an individual's system for drug driving tests.

In the ACT, while you may be permitted to consume medicinal cannabis by a medical professional, it is still an offence to drive with cannabis in your system and a medical prescription cannot be used as a defence. This is not the case in other jurisdictions. The Victorian Government recently amended the Road Safety Act 1986 so that as of 1 March 2025, drivers who use medicinal cannabis and are not impaired no longer face automatic driving bans if they are found to have THC in their system

In NSW, the Greens recently introduced the Road Transport Amendment (Medicinal Cannabis-Exemptions from Offences) Bill 2025, to bring in similar changes. The petitioners urge the ACT Government to follow the example of other states, and implement common sense changes, so medicinal cannabis users are not

unfairly penalised.

Your petitioners, therefore, request the Assembly change the laws of the *Road Transport (Alcohol and Drugs) Act 1977* to no longer automatically suspend medicinal cannabis users' licenses if they are found to have THC in their system and are not impaired. They also request the ACT Government investigate how to test levels of impairment from THC for drug driving testing, rather than relying on the presence of THC in an individual's system.

Canberra Institute of Technology—Diploma of Remedial Massage—petition 73-25

By Mr Emerson, from 153 residents:

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The following residents of the ACT draw the attention of the Assembly that the Remedial Massage Industry in Canberra and surrounding regions is facing an existential crisis with CIT showing intentions to cut their Diploma and Cert 4 Remedial Massage course entirely.

The Remedial Massage course at CIT has been the lifeblood of the local industry for 30+ years and in the past has been regarded as the best course in Australia. The problem:

- CIT executives have indicated that the Diploma of Remedial Massage course may be permanently cancelled.
- The course has been off scope since August 2024 due to CIT being audited by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). This process was delayed due to CIT not meeting certain criteria but eventually passing in March 2025. It is now under CIT's profile review which is a review of all courses. CIT executives have provided no timeline on the completion of this review. This means there hasn't been a new intake of massage students since January 2024.
- Remedial Massage is currently on the Skills Shortage list.
- The industry is crying out for more therapists to support a rapidly growing demand post the Covid era.

We encourage CIT to work more collaboratively with industry leaders that have shown a passionate desire to help CIT increase their student numbers and see the course remain exceptional. We want to ensure local health practices remain viable and supporting the healthcare of locals! We want to help, heal, educate and empower locals to be healthy and want to upskill, teach and inspire local Health professionals to be the best in the industry.

We want the course at CIT to retain its reputation as one of the premier courses for Remedial Massage training in Australia. As an industry Remedial Massage wants to positively contribute to our community health, visitor economy and sporting achievements of the Canberra region.

Your petitioners, therefore, request the Assembly to call on the ACT Government

to reinstate the Diploma of Remedial Massage course and inquire with CIT into their handling of this review and impress upon them the urgency to reinstate the course.

Fisher playground—upgrade—petition 32-25

By Ms Carrick, from 218 residents:

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The following residents of the ACT draw the attention of the Assembly to the existing community playground near Fisher shops is woefully inadequate.

The equipment is small and not suitable for a range of ages. There are electric BBQ facilities already in place, which are cleaned and maintained, and yet they are rarely used as there is insufficient seating, and no shelter. The space is not enticing as a space to gather and use for the community. There is ample space in the area to support a bigger and better playground facility without impacting on local residents.

New suburbs are receiving multiple large and expensive playgrounds, while those of us in older existing suburbs are going without. I would like to see some equity in these build projects, and making use of existing facilities. A proposal has been submitted to the ACT Chief Minister for consideration in the upcoming budget, and by supporting this petition we may force action on a previously unnoticed area.

Your petitioners, therefore, request the Assembly to call on the ACT Government to upgrade the Fisher playground with the installation of modern, inclusive play equipment suitable for children of a range of ages, the addition of shaded seating areas and picnic tables to encourage longer visits, and landscaping improvements to enhance safety and aesthetics. Community consultation on the design and elements is also requested to ensure that needs of all ages of children are considered.

Active travel—Belconnen-Kippax-Ginninderry—petitions 66-25 and 82-25

By Ms Clay, from 180 and 144 residents, respectively:

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The following residents of the ACT draw to the attention of the Assembly to the need to address the missing cycle (missing link) path in West Belconnen – specifically Kippax Shops to the Belconnen town centre.

Residents note that Ginninderry will deliver cycle way connections as part of their development (Stage 2 and Stage 3) down Drake Brockman Drive to William Hovell Drive, and from North Ginninderry access road along Parkwood Road joining a short existing path to Kippax Shops on Southern Cross Drive. Southern Cross Drive is an arterial, feeder road connecting West Belconnen suburbs to the Belconnen Town Centre and onwards towards Civic. This missing cycle path disincentivises people from riding and therefore locks more people into needing a car to get around. In a climate emergency, the Government must make it easier for

people to make climate-friendly choices in their everyday lives.

Your petitioners, therefore, request the Assembly to call on the ACT Government to: Deliver a physically separated, dedicated bicycle pathway connecting Kippax Shops to Belconnen Town Centre down Southern Cross Drive, using the MIS-05 Active Travel Facilities Design.

Following construction of the Southern Cross Drive cycleway, further construct an additional separated bike path from the corner of Southern Cross Drive and Kingsford Smith Drive up to the roundabout at Drake Brockman Drive (West Side) to connect it to the William Hovell Drive Duplication Project.

The Clerk having announced that the terms of the petitions would be recorded in Hansard and referred to the appropriate ministers for response pursuant to standing order 100, the petitions were received.

Ministerial responses

The following responses to petitions have been lodged:

Working With Vulnerable People scheme—registration fee—petition 37-25

By **Ms Orr**, Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services, and **Ms Cheyne**, Minister for City and Government Services, dated 25 November 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Miss Nuttall concerning the proposed fee for Working with Vulnerable People cards registration.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Petition E-PET-037-25 Keep WWVP (Working with Vulnerable People) cards free for volunteers

We refer to your letter of 2 September 2025 regarding Petition E-PET-037-25, tabled by Ms Laura Nuttall MLA in the ACT Legislative Assembly on 2 September 2025 concerning the proposed volunteer fee for Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) registrations.

The ACT Government recognises the critical role volunteers and the community sector play in delivering essential services to Canberrans—especially to those who are most vulnerable. We recognise that a WWVP registration is a requirement for many volunteering activities. This government also wants to ensure the ongoing sustainability of our scheme, so it continues to serve our community as a mechanism to protect vulnerable people.

After considering community feedback and in close collaboration with stakeholders, on 18 July 2025 the ACT Government announced it would not introduce an \$11 fee for WWVP volunteer registrations and will instead consider other measures to address the sustainability of the WWVP scheme.

The ACT Government has invested more than \$5 million in this year's Budget to

support the continued delivery of the WWVP scheme. We will continue to explore further policy improvements to ensure the scheme remains fair, effective and sustainable, while continuing to protect our community's most vulnerable members. The government will review the scheme to consider how to sustainably maintain the support it provides to sectors that engage with vulnerable people. This work will be done in consultation with stakeholders.

We trust this information addresses issues raised in the petition.

Transport—Hawker College bus service—petitions 42-25 and 53-25

From **Mr Steel**, Minister for Transport, dated 25 November 2025, in response to petitions lodged by Ms Clay concerning a designated school bus service for Hawker College.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter of 3 September 2025 concerning petitions E-PET-042-25 and PET 053-25, lodged by Ms Jo Clay MLA regarding a designated school bus for Hawker College.

Transport Canberra operates 4,293 scheduled bus services every weekday, using a fleet of 456 buses to provide as much coverage as possible across our widely dispersed city. Student transport is managed through a combination of dedicated school bus services, and supplementary route services.

Hawker College has varying school finishing times across the school week, with bell times of 1:00pm, 2:30pm 2:40pm, and 3:20pm. This provides a challenge in managing student transport requirements as Transport Canberra operates a consistent timetable across all weekdays of the school term.

Transport Canberra applied service adjustments to route 45 in April 2025 to better align with Hawker College's varying bell times, and the current timetable maintains four additional afternoon services on route 45 on school days. A combination of inbound and outbound, these services operate to support students travelling to suburbs within Hawker College's priority enrolment area.

Following receipt of the petitions, Transport Canberra conducted in-person passenger observations on both Belconnen and Kippax-bound services passing Hawker College which align with the bell times. These observations confirmed passenger boardings on arrival and at departure from Hawker College were well within vehicle carrying capacity.

Additionally, the data showed that these services are also regularly used by other members of the community, reinforcing the value of maintaining the current arrangements for the broader community of public transport users.

Therefore, the review determined the existing services adequately support student travel needs and the introduction of a dedicated school service would not be an efficient use of available fleet and driver resources, noting upcoming network constraints and operational priorities.

Transport Canberra will continue to observe patronage trends across the network to understand the changing needs of the Canberra community.

Thank you for bringing the petitions to my attention and I trust the information provided is helpful.

Legislation—Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025—petition 44-25

From **Mr Barr**, Chief Minister, dated 27 November 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Mr Emerson concerning support for the Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for referring petition number 044-25, tabled in the Legislative Assembly on 25 September 2025 by Mr Thomas Emerson MLA, regarding support for Mr Emerson's Private Member's Bill titled the Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 (the Bill).

The Bill proposes to amend the *Annual Reports (Government Agencies) Act 2004* (Annual Reports Act) and *Public Sector Management Act 1994* (PSMA) to legislate mechanisms to support the ACT Government's commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) and specifically, to implement Essential Actions 3.5 and 4.3 of the Productivity Commission's 2024 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – Study report Volume 1 (the Productivity Commission Report).

Response to the Petition

The petition called for the following action:

That all Members of the Legislative Assembly vote in support of the Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025.

While this is explicitly a matter for the Assembly, I am pleased to advise that the Government is continuing to work with stakeholders, including Mr Emerson, to support the passage of the Bill with the necessary amendments in place to continue the delivery of meaningful progress against the Government's commitments under the National Agreement.

As previously indicated, the Government supports the intent of the Bill, which aligns with the Government's pre-existing commitment to implement Essential Actions 3.5 and 4.3 of the Productivity Commission Report.

The Government provided a submission to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration to inform its inquiry into the Bill. In that submission, the Government stated that it considers some amendments are essential to implement Essential Actions 3.5 and 4.3 in an effective and appropriate way for the ACTPS. Work is currently underway to settle these amendments in consultation with Mr Emerson and the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body.

The Government continues to take other actions to implement its commitments under the National Agreement. The Cultural Transformation Branch in the Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate is currently in the process of developing pilot Cultural Care Plans for directorates and is working to uplift the cultural capability of the Senior Executive Service.

Should the Bill be agreed by the Legislative Assembly, the Government will develop an implementation plan to address training, assessments, reporting and evaluation to ensure it delivers effective systemic change, transparency and accountability.

Housing affordability—Rent Relief Fund—petition 40-25

From **Ms Cheyne**, Attorney-General, and **Ms Berry**, Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs, undated, in response to a petition lodged by Mr Rattenbury concerning the Rent Relief Fund.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter about petition E-PET-040-25 ‘Keep the Rent Relief Fund’, petitioned by Mr Geoffrey Buchanan, and supported by Mr Shane Rattenbury MLA.

Rent Relief Fund

The Rent Relief Fund (the Fund) first operated briefly from late 2021 to early 2022 as a COVID-19 response measure. The Fund was then re-established in April 2023 in response to post-pandemic cost of living pressures. It operated to July 2023 when it closed due to higher than anticipated demand causing the allocated Funding to be fully expended. The Fund was then re-opened again in September 2023 and operated until 4 July 2025.

The 2023-2025 version of the Fund provided private renters experiencing rental stress or financial hardship with a one-off payment of four weeks’ rent, up to a maximum of \$2,500. These funds were paid directly to the landlord or property manager to provide immediate assistance in meeting rental payments. ‘Rental stress’ is defined as spending more than 30% of gross household income on rent, excluding Commonwealth Rental Assistance (**CRA**).¹

Care Inc. (**Care**) was the Fund administrator. Care also provided other supports to applicants (such as financial counselling or referrals to other services) irrespective of whether they were eligible for a grant. The Government acknowledges and thanks Care for the excellent work they undertook in administering the Fund.

Since April 2023, the ACT Government has provided over \$3.7 million in grants and administration funding for the Fund.

Cessation of Fund

The previous iterations of the Fund were established as temporary measures to

support Canberrans during the period following COVID-19 lockdowns and then with post-pandemic cost of living pressures. They were not intended to be recurring measures, as it was anticipated that post-pandemic cost-of-living pressures would have stabilised by the end of last financial year.

Further, in December 2023, there was a large amount of allocated funds that were unspent. The Fund was allocated funding in the 2024-2025 financial year to extend its operation for a further financial year however, the funding for the 2024-25 was offset by the rollover of unspent grants funds from the 2023-24 financial year. The unspent funds for the 2023-2024 financial year suggested a decrease in demand for the Fund.

In addition to this, the ACT Government has announced a range of housing initiatives as part of the 2025-2026 Budget designed to alleviate more systemic housing pressures. These are outlined further below.

Cost-of-living measures in 2025-2026 budget

In the 2025-26 budget, the Government committed to spending approximately \$152 million on cost-of-living support for ACT households. These include:

- permanently increasing the Electricity, Gas and Water Rebate to \$800 to eligible recipients (around 40,000 households) in 2025-26;
- providing a one-off payment of \$250 to all ACT apprentices and trainees working in the ACT and an additional \$250 to first-year apprentice and trainees;
- a \$150 registration fee reduction for light trailers weighing 4.5 tonnes or less;
- increasing stamp duty concessions for first home buyers, pensioners, and people with disability;
- establishing a Food Bank Fund to support Canberrans facing financial stress and food insecurity; and
- packages of essential items worth \$200 to first-time mothers in vulnerable households and other families identified as needing support.

The ACT Government also provides a number of measures to assist renters in the ACT, including:

- help finding an affordable rental;
- interest-free loans to pay bonds;
- free home energy checks;
- help reducing running costs; and
- minimum standards for ceiling insulation in rental properties.

In addition to the above, the ACT Government has allocated \$262,142 to the Mobile Debt Clinic in the 2025/2026 Budget. This service, administered by Care, provides a mobile consumer credit legal advice service for people impacted by domestic and family violence, financial abuse, mental ill health, or any other disadvantage. This is another way that the Government is committed to supporting vulnerable members of our community.

Housing initiatives in the 25-26 Budget

The 2025-26 Budget includes more than \$145 million in funding over four years for housing initiatives:

- An additional \$20 million for the Affordable Housing Project Fund, bringing the total funding to \$100 million
- \$90 million for social housing
- \$12 million in planning and land release initiatives
- \$17 million to support renters and homeowners
- \$19 million for frontline homelessness services and emergency supports

These initiatives indicate that the ACT Government is committed to alleviating short term cost-of-living pressures in the community, whilst also taking steps to address housing affordability in the longer term.

The petition

The petition calls for the Fund to be reinstated through the provision of funding in the 2025-2026 ACT Budget. It also calls on the Government to commit to the Fund continuing for as long as there is evidence that it is needed to support the most vulnerable people in the community. The petition seeks to draw the attention of the ACT Legislative Assembly to the ongoing need for a carefully targeted, means tested, and highly effective source of cost-of-living relief and housing support.

Government consideration of evidence relating to the effectiveness of Rent Relief Funds*Reports on the ACT Rent Relief Fund*

As part of its responsibilities as Fund administrator, Care reported to the ACT Government on the operation of the Fund. The most recent report from Care, dated 30 August 2025 demonstrates that from 17 April 2023 until 31 August 2025:

- 2208 applications were received;
- 1671 applications were approved;
- 270 applications were declined;
- 116 grants were withdrawn; and
- 31 applications were for a second grant within 12 months.²

The report also indicated that out of the 1671 approved applications, 1374 recipients were for those in a private rentals, 63 in student accommodation, 34 boarding, 165 in share houses, and 35 in community housing.

The report also provided data on how much of a person's income went to their rental payments. It indicated that 31% of grant recipients spend between 31% and 45% of their income on their rent and 25% of grant recipients spend 76% or more of their income on rent. This indicates that grant funding was well targeted and went to individuals and families experiencing a high degree of rental stress.

Other important data provided by Care indicates:

- 57% of recipients also received Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA);
- 58% of recipients held a concession card;
- 19% of recipients were on a public housing wait list; and
- 46% of recipients had received a notice of eviction or notice to remedy, were in rent arrears or were in ACAT proceedings.

Impact on grant recipients

Care surveyed grant recipients six months after receipt of their grant. Responses were received from 9.6% of grant recipients, which is a relatively small sample size. However, the survey results indicated that 72% of respondents were still in the same property they had received the grant for, and 48% said receiving the grant had a significant impact on them. These responses indicate that there the Fund created positive medium term impacts for Fund recipients.

In general feedback given to Care, 84% of recipients said that receiving the grant had improved their financial position ‘a lot’, with 12% saying it improved their financial position ‘quite a bit.’

While Care has informed the Government that, in some circumstances, the Fund prevented homelessness by maintaining tenancies, not all tenancies were maintained. Due to the nature of people’s circumstances changing, it can be difficult to confirm with quantitative data if the Fund was the crucial factor in maintaining a tenancy for each recipient. It is acknowledged that tenancies can end for a range of reasons not related to a tenant’s ability to pay rent, such as needing to move due to change in family circumstances, or a landlord choosing to sell or move into the property.

Qualitative data captured by Care demonstrates that the receipt of a grant substantially decreased stress experienced by recipients. Many recipients reported the positive impacts of less stress and anxiety, being able to focus on other acute issues impacting their lives, and being able to access additional supports (such as financial counselling or referrals).

Other feedback from Care was that the Fund created additional benefits beyond financial relief. Care indicated that one of the strengths of the Fund was that it encouraged individuals in crisis to seek assistance from Care. Care was then able to provide onward referrals, connecting grant recipients with other organisations and support programs – such as financial counselling, legal supports or other emergency relief programs. This more wholistic “wrap-around” service response enabled individuals to address other matters that may have contributed to their financial strain. Care considers that such interventions may encourage future service seeking behaviour. Where individuals are encouraged to seek assistance early, this can prevent future problems from escalating.

This data indicates that the previous versions of the Fund were targeted and a useful measure to temporarily assist people facing rental stress.

Impact on Public Housing

The petition asserts there is a shortfall of approximately 5400 social and affordable dwellings in Canberra, including public housing wait times exceeding five years.

From September 2023, Care provided data on grant recipients who were also on the public housing waiting list. The report shows that 19.3% of recipients (from 4 September 2023 to 4 July 2025) reported that they were on the public housing waitlist. This suggests that the Fund supported those on the public housing waitlist to maintain their private tenancies while awaiting allocation of housing assistance.

Local and National data on rental stress

Canberrans have increasingly experienced financial hardship in recent years.³ The Fund has been a key Government initiative to address cost-of-living and housing affordability pressures. Rental affordability for those on low incomes has reportedly been impacting people's ability to afford other essential items like utilities, food, education and transport costs.⁴ The combination of poor rental affordability and other cost of living pressures, creates a very challenging environment for low-income households. It can leave them particularly vulnerable to short-term financial shocks. For example, short-term unemployment, illness, or a relationship breakdown can quickly cause financial stress, and, if not addressed, may result in long-term or entrenched financial hardship or poverty, including falling into rental arrears or being evicted.⁵ Recent research has shown as many as 4 in 10 Australians could not raise \$2000 in an emergency, emphasising the magnitude of this problem.⁶

While general rental affordability in the ACT is relatively better than other jurisdictions due to higher household incomes,⁷ rental affordability for those on low incomes remains poor.

In 2025, the Tenancy Skills Institute surveyed every state and territory in Australia as well as New Zealand on tenancies that were at risk of failing. On average, 4.84% of tenancies surveyed were at risk, which means those people are significantly close to becoming homeless.⁸ The primary risk factor identified by the report was being in rent arrears. Specifically for the ACT residents surveyed, it was identified by 69% of respondents that rental arrears would be the primary reason for a tenancy being at risk of failing in the ACT. Despite these risk factors, The Tenancy Skills Institute Report specifically noted that property managers in the ACT had had high awareness of the Rent Relief Fund, and that good outcomes had been achieved via the program until it ceased in July 2025.⁹

The *Rental Affordability Snapshot: Essential Workers Edition Report* published in October 2025 examined over 51,000 rental property listings and tested the affordability of these against wages of essential occupations to determine whether these workers could afford to rent these properties. According to the report, a hospitality worker could not afford a single ACT rental property.¹⁰

Further, a 2025 report from Poverty and Inequity found that 68% of ACT residents surveyed had a rent increase in the previous year, with only 47% saying they could comfortably afford a 5% increase in their rent.¹¹

The *Everybody's Home 2025 Priced Out Report* states that Australians need an annual income of \$130,000 to afford the average rental, which demonstrates that rental stress has extended beyond low-income earners. The report notes that people earning \$70,000 per annum would have to spend more than half their income on the national median rent for a unit.¹² Specifically for ACT residents, the data

highlighted a severe affordability crisis. Those earning \$40,000 were found to be spending around 83% of their income on rent.¹³ Even those earning \$130,000 a year are paying around 31% of their income on rent. This means that even those people earning six figures would likely end up in rental stress.

Programs in other jurisdictions

The Government notes that other jurisdictions offer some form of rental assistance for people struggling to pay their rent. However, each jurisdiction differs in its approach to rental support.

Under New South Wales' Rent Choice program, eligible households pay 25% of their weekly household income, and the NSW Government pays the outstanding rent, up to 36 months.¹⁴ The program slowly reduces the subsidy after 12 months, and the recipient may exit the program earlier. In 2023, an evaluation of Rent Choice program found that it is a diversionary program leading people away from public housing.¹⁵ However, it is only intended to be short-term assistance, with the program intended to teach recipients how to become financially independent of the program. The evaluation also found that less than 20% of people exiting Rent Choice subsidies return for further housing support.

Western Australia also has a rental assistance program which was recently evaluated. The program was found to have successfully improved housing stability and financial wellbeing outcomes of recipients six months after receiving assistance.¹⁶ The evaluation report found 89% of surveyed clients who received the brokerage payment (of up to \$5000 or in some cases 50% of future rent costs for maximum three months) reported that they maintained their tenancy three months after receiving a support payment, and 85% maintained their tenancy after six months. The report also found that 90% of recipients reported that the negative impacts of their immediate crisis had been reduced following receiving financial counselling.

The two evaluations mentioned above demonstrate positive outcomes for renters would receive assistance under those programs. However, it is acknowledged that both the New South Wales Rent Choice program and the Western Australian Rent Relief Fund operate substantially differently to how the Fund operated in the ACT.

Similar to the ACT, in Tasmania, eligible applicants can receive a one-off financial assistance payment, capped at 4 weeks rent, and available once every 12 months. However, there is no available evaluation or review on this program.

Noting the positive outcomes for renters in other jurisdictions, the Government considers that there is merit in rental assistance programs which provide support to people on low incomes within our community.

The Future of the Rent Relief Fund

The Government acknowledges the community has advocated for the continued need for the Fund, due to the ongoing cost-of-living pressures experienced in the community.

Following feedback from service providers and from the community about the impact of the cessation of the Fund, as well as considering the data on housing affordability and cost-of-living pressures, on 1 July 2026 the Government will reinstate a reinvigorated version of the Fund to assist people who are struggling to

pay their rent.

The details of this program are being carefully considered by Government to ensure a comprehensive approach to a complex issue that achieves the best outcomes for the community. On this basis, the ACT Government is pleased to provide *in-principle support* to establishing a reinvigorated version of the Fund.

We acknowledge the petition and thank the signatories for their interest in this matter.

¹ Productivity Commission, G Housing and homelessness - Report on Government Services 2025, 30 January 2025, p 20.

² Data on applications for a second grant within 12 months was obtained from 1 July 2024.

³ Select Committee on Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, Inquiry into cost of living pressures in the ACT, May 2023, p. 3.

⁴ Community Affairs Committee, The Senate, The worsening rental crisis in Australia – Final Report, December 2023, p. 64

⁵ Community Affairs References Committee, The Senate, The extent and nature of poverty in Australia, May 2023, p. 19

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Housing and Occupancy Costs, 25 February 2022; National Australia Bank, NAB Consumer Insights, March 2023.

⁷ Real Estate Institute of Australia, Housing Affordability Report, June 2025

⁸ Tenancy Skills Institute, 'The Next Wave of Homelessness – Research Paper', August 2025, p 3.

⁹ Tenancy Skills Institute, 'The Next Wave of Homelessness – Research Paper', August 2025, p 21.

¹⁰ Anglicare Australia, Rental Affordability Snapshot: Essential Workers Report 2025, 16 October 2025, p 9.

¹¹ ACOSS and UNSW Sydney, Poverty and Inequality Partnership report, 'Rights at Risk: Rising Rents and Repercussions' 2025, p 41.

¹² Everybody's Home, Priced Out: An index of affordable rental for Australian voter, 18 March 2025

¹³ Everybody's Home, Priced Out: An index of affordable rental for Australian voter, 18 March 2025, p 19.

¹⁴ This is subject to exceptions, e.g. different income requirements may apply if a household is at serious threat of family violence: NSW Government, Department of Communities and Justice, Rent Choice Policy, 12 September 2023.

¹⁵ ARTD and Taylor Fry, Social Housing Service Improvement Initiatives Evaluation Final Report - Additional Rent Choice Analysis, 21 July 2023,

¹⁶ Centre for Social Impact and University of Western Australia, 'Evaluation of the WA Rent Relief Program', March 2025

Ainslie—91A Wakefield Gardens—petition 33-25

From **Ms Stephen-Smith**, Minister for Health, dated 28 November 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Mr Emerson concerning the re-imagining of Wakefield Gardens.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter concerning petition E-PET 033-25, lodged by Mr Thomas Emerson MLA regarding the future use of the building located at 91A Wakefield Gardens, Ainslie, ACT 2602, block 10 section 27.

The ACT Government initiated community consultations on the future use of the

site on 15 September 2025, closing on 7 November. I appreciate the engagement and enthusiasm of the Ainslie community to drive the rejuvenation of the site to continue serving the community. A Listening Report, capturing key themes and insights from the consultation, will be published on the YourSay website in early December.

On 19 August 2025, the vacant building at 91A Wakefield Gardens was illegally accessed and severely damaged by fire. Following advice from independent engineers and a loss assessor that the building structure should be removed, Infrastructure Canberra is progressing the demolition of the existing building. This includes undertaking relevant planning and heritage approval processes. A Development Application is being prepared and will be lodged for the demolition in early 2026. Subject to approvals, the demolition of the structure will be completed by mid-2026.

The longer-term use of the site is being considered by the ACT government in context of the community's feedback and will be subject to future budget decisions.

Once again, I think the local community for its engagement on the future of this important site and I hope this information is helpful to the Assembly.

Yarralumla—proposed substation—petitions 57-25 and 70-25

From **Mr Steel**, Minister for Transport, dated 28 November 2025, in response to petitions lodged by Ms Carrick concerning the relocation of the light rail traction power substation.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter concerning petition E-PET 057-25 and PET-070-25, lodged by Ms Fiona Carrick MLA regarding the request to relocate Traction Power Substation 8 (TPS8) as part of the Light Rail Stage 2B (LRS2B) project.

The ACT Government is progressing work on the early design and planning activities for LRS2B. The current focus for the project is the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The ACT Government submitted the Draft EIS to Commonwealth and Territory environmental agencies in December 2024. The document was accepted by the Territory Planning Authority (TPA) and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), and commenced Public Exhibition on 7 July 2025 for a period of nine weeks and closed on 5 September 2025. At close of exhibition, 230 unique submissions were received.

As outlined in the Draft EIS and Public Domain Master Plan (PDMP) for the LRS2B project, several potential sites for TPS8 were assessed during the design development phase, including locations spanning from north of Hopetoun Circuit to south of Kent Street. These assessments considered technical feasibility, land use, ownership, environmental and heritage factors, and proximity to residential areas. Importantly, the site identified in the Draft EIS is indicative only and subject to further survey and design. An alternative site on the south side of Adelaide Avenue (between Denison Street and the Deakin car park) is also under

consideration. The final location and design of TPS8 may change in response to community and stakeholder feedback.

Following the closure of the draft EIS public exhibition period on 5 September 2025, submissions from stakeholders and the community are now being considered to inform revisions to the draft EIS where appropriate. The revised, final EIS will include a summary report outlining the comments received, key issues raised, and responses to the matters and values identified, and will also present one route alignment.

Once this process is complete, the revised final EIS will be lodged again to both the Australian and ACT governments for consideration and approval. This process will determine whether the project can proceed, and if so, under what conditions. The final EIS will also be made publicly available.

The ACT Government is committed to minimising visual and environmental impacts and integrating infrastructure sensitively within precinct settings. Feedback plays a vital role in shaping the final design and ensuring the project aligns with community values and environmental stewardship.

Thank you for raising this matter. I trust this information is of assistance.

Trees—dangerous trees—petition 39-25

From **Ms Cheyne**, Minister for City and Government Services, dated 30 November 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Ms Castley concerning the management of trees.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter concerning petition E-PET 039-25, lodged by Ms Leanne Castley MLA regarding the management of trees.

The ACT Government appreciates the opportunity to provide information about the maintenance and planting of trees in the walkway between Doolette Place and Menzie Place in Kambah.

The City and Environment Directorate is responsible for the management and maintenance of more than 846,000 trees on public land and streets within urban areas of the ACT and employs a team of suitably skilled staff to carry out this task. Ensuring that public safety is not compromised by the presence of trees within the urban area is a high priority and decisions relating to the management of urban trees are generally based on this objective.

A City Services arborist has inspected the trees in this area, and there are no works required at this time. One request has previously been received for a fallen branch on a tree at the rear of 6 Doolette Street Kambah in February 2025. The fallen branch was removed and the tree was assessed as structurally sound and not requiring further works.

Due to suspected termite activity in the tree, it was also inspected by Royal Pest Control and direct treatment to a *Coptotermes Sp.* termite nest was undertaken on

29 May 2025.

Canberra's urban forest is a key part of what makes our city the most liveable in Australia. It is world renowned and a legacy of the forward-thinking that has characterised the development of our city. The urban forest is part of our identity as the bush capital. In line with targets set out in Canberra's Living Infrastructure Plan, by 2045 we aim to have 30% of our urban environment covered by a tree canopy or tree canopy equivalents such as green roofs, shrub beds, wetlands, or rain gardens.

Planting locations are particularly focussed in areas of low urban canopy cover and areas where the canopy target is at risk of decline with the ageing of existing trees. Gaps in the existing tree canopy cover are also filled in suburbs which are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Residents can also nominate locations for planting, as was the case with the walkway between Doolette Place and Menzie Place in Kambah.

Species are chosen to match the existing character of each area. Consistent plantings of street trees along our public nature strips help to tie a street together and create unified, high-quality streetscapes. Where planting is proposed in new locations, species are selected to best suit the specific location, taking the impacts on the surrounding environment into consideration. For example, to promote solar access deciduous trees are planted on streets aligned east to west so that solar access to north facing residences is maintained in winter.

In the walkway between Doolette Place and Menzie Place in Kambah, smaller deciduous species have been selected due to the limited space available and to minimise any unwelcome shading of the adjoining residences.

The trees which have been planted in the public easement are a very small species of Crab-apple, *Malus transitoria* 'Royal Raindrops', which does not reach higher than 4-5 metres.

An additional tree has been planted at a distance of at least 15 metres from properties and can grow to a maximum height of 15 metres, but somewhere between 10-12 metres is more likely. This species, *Fraxinus pennsylvanica* 'cimmzam', was chosen for its reliability, autumn colour, shade in summer, and solar access in winter.

All proposed planting sites are assessed and approved by the mowing team prior to planting, and there is sufficient space to mow around the trees planted in the walkway.

Thank you for bringing the petition to my attention. I trust the information provided is helpful.

Roads—speed limits—Lyneham—petition 4-25

From **Ms Cheyne**, Minister for City and Government Services, dated 30 November 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Mr Emerson concerning a pilot 30 kilometre per hour speed limit in lower Lyneham.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter regarding petition E-PET 004-25, lodged by Mr Thomas Emerson MLA regarding the need for traffic calming and piloting of 30km/h streets in lower Lyneham.

Traffic calming in the ACT is used where there is a crash history that relates to vehicle speeding. Traffic calming is usually only implemented on collector roads as vehicle speeds on local are usually already slow. Local roads are predominantly used by the residents of the street, so issues with speeding drivers are often better managed with enforcement.

A review of the crash history for Brigalow Street, Longstaff Street and Lewin Street, Glover Street and Dyson Street shows that most of the crashes are occurring on Brigalow Street, where a total of 26 crashes have been reported in the period 2018-2024.

These crashes included one fatal crash, two cyclist injury crashes and 23 property damage crashes. Two of the crashes (including one of the cyclist crashes and the fatal crash) occurred at the zebra crossing near Lyneham shops / Lyneham Primary School. This crossing has since received lighting upgrades and is being monitored to assess what further measures may be required.

Longstaff Street, Lewin Street, Glover Street have had a total of six reported crashes with five of those involving parking and one occurring at an intersection. No crashes were reported between 2018 - 2024 on Dyson Street. None of the reported crashes in these streets resulted in injury requiring medical treatment.

Traffic surveys in lower Lyneham were last conducted in 2022. Roads ACT notes that high density development has occurred along Brigalow Street in particular with some yet to be completed or occupied. It will be appropriate to conduct new studies in late 2026 when these developments have reached a stable level of occupancy.

The previously recorded traffic speeds and volumes are as follows:

- a. Brigalow Street carries approximately 3,500 vehicles per day with an average speed of 35km/h during the school zone times and 45km/h outside the school zone times.
- b. Longstaff Street carries approximately 350 vehicles per day at an average speed of 35km/h.

The traffic data suggests that speeds are already close to the 30km/h and so traffic calming is unlikely to yield significant benefit at this point in time.

Roads ACT has recently drafted guidelines for setting speed limits that now includes potential for a 30km/h speed limit. These guidelines reflect national best practice and are modelled on the guidance recently released in NSW.

A trial of a 30km/h speed limit, including calming features to manage vehicle speeds is proposed for Sherbrook Street in Ainslie. This trial is subject to consideration and funding for the construction works. If supported, monitoring of the scheme will be undertaken both before and after the scheme is in place.

It is recommended that the outcomes of the Sherbrook Street 30km/h speed limit be assessed before any further 30km/h speed limits are considered.

I trust this information is of assistance.

Motion to take note of petitions

MR SPEAKER: Pursuant to standing order 98A, I propose the question:

That the petitions and responses so lodged be noted.

Active travel—Belconnen-Kippax-Ginninderry—petitions 66-25 and 82-25 Transport—Hawker College bus service—petitions 42-25 and 53-25

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (10.18): I would like to speak about two petitions in Belconnen for better public and active transport.

People want to be able to travel around Canberra easily, whether it is to school, home, work or anywhere else they need to be—and not everyone can drive, nor do they all want to drive. That is why public transport and active travel links are a basic community need.

When they are done well, they ensure everyone can travel comfortably and safely. But Belconnen is lacking—particularly west Belco. I regularly receive emails and calls from constituents about how there are too many incomplete paths, dangerous conditions, or missing links entirely. That means people cannot walk, ride or wheel around in safety and comfort.

One community member who contacted me about this is Mirek. He is an experienced and avid cyclist who can confidently ride on the road alongside cars, but even Mirek is worried about riding on Southern Cross Drive. It is a busy, fast street, and it is a key barrier to active travel.

Three hundred and twenty-three people want safe, separated, direct paths to walk, ride and wheel between Kippax and Belco town centre and onwards to other places like Civic. That is what prompted this petition.

Good paths are for everyone. They are for riders, walkers and joggers of all levels. I ride around all the time on these paths, and I see people walking their dogs, scooting, people in wheelchairs using them, and many more.

This is also a way to take climate action in a climate crisis. The Labor climate minister has said the ACT will not meet its legislated emissions reduction target, and that we are off track to achieve net zero by 2045. Transport continues to be the ACT's biggest polluter, making up well over 60 per cent of our emissions. So to meet our own targets, government should be doing what they can to remove the barriers that stop people from choosing active travel. We need better paths, and we also need better public transport. We do not know when we will get light rail in Belconnen or exactly where in west Belconnen it will go. We need our buses to perform better.

I also want to speak to the government response on the recent petition calling for more

bus services at Hawker College. Last year, Freya and Aimee and other students from Hawker College asked for more frequent buses, simply because students were being crammed into the bus serving the school; the 45. It is the second time they have petitioned for this.

The 45 is a local service that the whole community uses, not just students of Hawker College. It connects many residential areas and seven schools directly to Kippax shops and to the Belconnen interchange. Students have since said that it is not helping them safely travel, and, in most cases, they are denied getting onto the bus in the first place due to capacity.

The government said they have looked at the services during these peak travel times, and they have concluded the services are adequate. Now, I am not sure what is going on here. Hundreds of students at Hawker College have signed this petition and have called for government to provide more bus services, but the government say that is not needed. The students are the ones catching the bus twice a day, five days a week. They are the ones who have been experiencing overcrowding. They say the first bus is regularly filled to capacity. Other members in the community cannot get onto the bus, and students often have to wait for the next bus.

Some students find it quicker to walk home after school—up to a 40-minute hike—rather than wait for that next bus. They say that catching public transport from Hawker College has become inconvenient for them and almost impossibly difficult. Also, not everyone has access to a car or lives within walking distance of the school, so the current system is disadvantaging those students in particular.

These are real stories that students have been sharing with my office, and they do not match the government response we have seen. Younger people are the ones who are impacted the most by the decisions we make in parliament, and every single MLA here has a responsibility to genuinely consider their views in every decision that we make.

People in Belconnen want to choose active travel. They want to choose public transport. The Greens are hearing from constituents who want more accessible pathways; who want better connections; who want better buses. It is a disappointing response that we have seen from the transport minister regarding Hawker College, and I am really hoping the transport minister can listen to the everyday experience of our people.

So, thank you, Mirek, for pushing for better bikeways in west Belconnen; and thank you to Freya and Aimee for trying to make public transport more accessible to the students at Hawker College.

Fisher playground—upgrade—petition 32-25

Active travel—Belconnen-Kippax-Ginninderry—petitions 66-25 and 82-25

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.23): I rise today to present a petition signed by 218 Canberra residents who draw the attention of the Assembly to the state of the community playground near the Fisher shops.

This playground, as it currently stands, is woefully inadequate for the needs of the local community. The equipment is small, outdated and unsuitable for children across a range

of ages. While the area does have an electric barbecue that is cleaned and maintained, it is rarely used. Why? Because there is insufficient seating, no shelter, and the space simply does not invite families to gather and enjoy it. Yet there is ample room in this location to support a bigger and better playground—and at the same time support the local shops.

Investing in playground improvements is not just about play; it is about building stronger communities. Modern playgrounds promote child development, encourage physical activity and foster social connections. They improve safety, inclusivity and accessibility for families of all shapes and sizes. Beyond these benefits, upgraded playgrounds can boost local business traffic and create environmentally sustainable spaces. In the long term, investing in durable, high quality equipment saves money by reducing maintenance costs and preventing liability issues.

The community's request is clear. A playground needs to be added to the government's program of works for playground upgrades, so they call on the government to: install modern, inclusive play equipment suitable for children of all ages; add shaded seating areas and picnic tables to encourage longer visits; improve landscaping to enhance safety and aesthetics; and conduct community consultation to ensure the design meets the needs of families.

Mr Speaker, this is an opportunity to transform an under-utilised space into a vibrant hub for families and community life. I urge the ACT government to deliver the playground upgrades that the Fisher community needs and deserves.

I would also like to mention the west Belconnen cycleway because this petition highlights the missing cycle links that are needed—including between Kippax shops and the Belconnen town centre. A physically separated path along Southern Cross Drive will make cycling and other active transport options safer, more attractive and accessible for everyone. But this is not just an issue in Belconnen. We need to deliver missing links in our active transport network across Canberra, to effectively encourage mode shift—reducing both car dependency and transport emissions.

One of the most significant missing links is between Woden and the city; a major commuting corridor. A separated bike path would provide a safe corridor, giving people a real choice in how they travel. Work needs to begin now on this critical missing link in our active travel network. If we are serious about effective climate action and creating a livable city, we must deliver a city-wide active travel network.

Active travel—Belconnen-Kippax-Ginninderry—petitions 66-25 and 82-25

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (10.26): I want to thank Ms Clay for this petition that she has spoken to, about a dedicated cycleway from Kippax to the Belconnen town centre via Southern Cross Drive.

I do note that the Standing Committee on Transport and City Services has an open inquiry at the moment on municipal services, and one of the terms of reference includes the appropriateness of the geographic spread of active travel infrastructure, parks and playgrounds. That inquiry remains open, and I would encourage the committee—of which I am not a part—to consider looking into this particular issue in west Belconnen,

as part of its infrastructure and municipal services inquiry. It certainly fits within the current terms of reference. Whether the committee decides to do a standalone inquiry or not, I think it has within its power at the moment to incorporate what this petition has called for. I do hope it does so.

Ainslie—91A Wakefield Gardens—petition 33-25

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (10.27): Mr Speaker, congratulations on your elevation to this lofty role, and I look forward to your entirely non-partisan chairing of the business of the Legislative Assembly. New indeed.

I was very pleased to table the response to the petition that was sponsored by Mr Emerson in relation to 91A Wakefield Gardens, and even more pleased this morning to release the ACT government report on the feedback from consultation around 91A Wakefield Gardens. The listening report is now available on the YourSay website, following consultation supported by Infrastructure Canberra.

More than 380 people provided feedback on the future use of 91A Wakefield Gardens during the six-week consultation period, through an online survey, six pop-up sessions, including one that I attended at Ainslie shops, and meetings with key stakeholders. There were also more than 1,600 visits to the government's YourSay page, and 2,300 residents received letters, supported by social media engagement and in-person activities.

This was one of the best-supported local engagements that we have seen, and I have no doubt that that was in part because of the engagement that Mr Emerson had been doing on this issue as well. I want to acknowledge that Mr Emerson made a substantial submission to the consultation process, bringing together feedback that he had received from the community, including through a face-to-face forum that, unfortunately, I was unable to attend. All the feedback is that it was a very positive gathering. Certainly, the feedback from that process aligns with the rest of the feedback that we have received from the community, including that the community is very focused on preserving the history and heritage character of the site and gardens.

This facility was the original home of the Canberra Mothercraft Society; it was then home to Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service, as it was at the time. People are very keen to see that heritage and history recognised. People are keen to ensure that we create an inclusive and affordable community space and/or multi-use facility at the site, with different views around the type of built form or otherwise.

Improving green space and sustainability were very important themes from the feedback, as was ensuring accessibility for all ages and abilities. Other suggestions related to having better play facilities in the area, with some feedback about the usability of the current playground, and a desire to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and First Nations leadership in planning for the future use of the site. Unsurprisingly for this local community, sustainability, community gardens and places for gathering were really key themes.

It is important to recognise that the site presents both challenges and opportunities,

including having heritage-listed gardens, mature trees and a limited footprint, which will shape what can be realistically achieved on the site. But consultation of this type not only enables us to hear from the community about this specific site, but also reinforces the values of the community, as we think about refreshing and introducing other community assets across the inner north.

Once again, I thank everybody who engaged in both the petition and the consultation process, and I look forward to progressing this work in 2026.

Ainslie—91A Wakefield Gardens—petition 33-25

Canberra Institute of Technology—Diploma of Remedial Massage—petition 73-25

Drugs—drug-driving—medicinal cannabis—petition 46-25

Housing affordability—Rent Relief Fund—petition 40-25

Legislation—Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025—petition 44-25

Roads—speed limits—Lyneham—petition 4-25

Sport and recreation—indoor facilities—petition 63-25

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (10.31): I rise to speak to multiple petitions and government responses to petitions that have been tabled this morning. It turns out that I have sponsored a lot of petitions, so we will see how this goes, with the time limit that I have.

I will talk, firstly, about indoor sporting facilities for Canberra's north side. We have heard a lot in this place about the lack of indoor sporting facilities in the south. Thank you, Ms Carrick. In speaking with local community members about this petition, it is clear that these challenges are also being experienced to some extent in the north. One resident I spoke with put it best when he said, "If you play a grass-based sport, you can walk around the corner to one of Canberra's ovals and practice your sport. You can do it for free. People who play things like basketball can't do that."

With that said, this petition was brought not primarily in relation to basketball but by the Dickson Squash Club, who want to see the government step in and ensure sufficient squash facilities are provided in the context of the impending loss of their facility at the Dickson Tradies site, and to address sporting facilities priorities in the north that were identified 10 years ago, including in relation to squash facilities, in the 2015 ACT Indoor Sports Facilities Study.

With respect to the petition on medicinal cannabis and licence suspension, if road safety really is the goal of random drug testing, that testing should test impairment levels, if it can, in the same way that roadside breath testing is impairment based. In the absence of evidence-led impairment testing, RDTs may be seen more as revenue-raising ventures than public safety measures.

The use of medicinal cannabis is a widely accepted healthcare treatment, and there is no logic, as far as I can see, to punitive, zero-tolerance approaches that can result in licence suspensions for people who are not impaired and who are simply following the guidance of their healthcare practitioners in taking their medicine. I hope to see this petition kick off evidence-led government reform on roadside drug testing policy here

in the ACT.

On the Diploma of Remedial Massage at CIT, according to the ACT government's Skills Needs List website, that list informs ACT government funding priorities at a qualification level for vocational education and training. Remedial massage is on that skills needs list, and Diploma of Remedial Massage is the requisite qualification for that profession, but it has not been offered by CIT for the past 12 months.

Remedial massage therapists that I have spoken with echo that there is a critical shortage of therapists across the territory, and they are deeply concerned about the potential discontinuation of that course at CIT. I stand with the principal petitioner and other industry representatives, as well as affected Canberrans, in calling for CIT to urgently reinstate its remedial massage program and for the minister to play his role in ensuring that happens. The minister has indicated a review of the course offering is nearing conclusion, and I look forward, hopefully, to hearing a favourable update, perhaps in this place, as soon as possible.

Another government response is on supporting the Closing the Gap bill, and I am really pleased to have reached an agreed position with the government to support the passage of this bill later today. The legislation will clarify that Closing the Gap in life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans is core government business.

I would like particularly to acknowledge the undying work and advocacy of our local First Nations community, including the Elected Body. It is not lost on me that it is those who have been harmed most by systemic injustices in our public institutions who continue to carry a disproportionate burden for driving change across those institutions. This bill goes some way, I hope, to addressing that imbalance.

We also heard back about the Rent Relief Fund petition today. It is great to have a clear commitment with a clear timeline, in terms of reinstating a new fund of some kind on 1 July next year. It will be important, of course, and many members will be interested to see what that fund looks like, and to ensure that it provides support that is as good as, if not better than, hopefully, the Rent Relief Fund.

The response shows that the government has listened to, valued and is acting on the insights provided by the community sector and our community more broadly, but it is also an acknowledgement that there is a need for support. I would encourage consideration of a temporary reinstatement of the Rent Relief Fund in the interim, while further consideration is made regarding the longer term future of this program.

On reimagining Wakefield Gardens, I very much welcome the government response to this petition and the release today of the 91A Wakefield Gardens listening report. I also want to thank Minister Stephen-Smith and her office for their constructive engagement with me, my office and the Wakefield Gardens working group on what is next for this important community asset. I also acknowledge Mr Rattenbury, who attended that forum and participated in this process as well.

The report incorporates themes from the working group's community-led proposal, including low-cost shared community spaces, First Nations leadership and service delivery, a community garden with urban farming elements, nature play, and the need

for upgraded play facilities, which the minister mentioned. It is welcome to see that the government has also made moves to demolish the long-dormant building at 91A Wakefield Gardens, which is now unsafe, after a fire earlier this year.

Finally, in relation to the petition on a 30 kilometre an hour speed limit pilot, I welcome the government's plans for an active street on Sherbrooke Street in Ainslie, and look forward to seeing such streets rolled out more broadly across the territory.

Standing orders—suspension

Motion (by **Miss Nuttall**) agreed to, with the concurrence of an absolute majority:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent debate to continue for an hour.

Ainslie—91A Wakefield Gardens—petition 33-25

Housing affordability—Rent Relief Fund—petition 40-25

Roads—speed limits—Lyneham—petition 4-25

Sport and recreation—indoor facilities—petition 63-25

Yarralumla—proposed substation—petitions 57-25 and 70-25

MR RATTENBURY(Kurrajong) (10.37): Mr Speaker, welcome to the role, and all the best with it.

There are a number of petitions that I want to speak to today, so I will bump through them. I want particularly to focus on the Rent Relief Fund petition, which, of course, I originally sponsored. Everyone deserves a safe, affordable home to live in, regardless of their financial circumstances. We know that the cost-of-living pressure is only increasing, that housing is being treated as a commodity instead of a human right, and that Canberrans are paying more now than ever to keep a roof over their heads. If you are an essential worker, a nurse or a cleaner, or, heaven forbid, single, we know that you are unlikely to be able to own a house in our city; and, even if you want to rent, it will be really hard to find an affordable property.

Our community organisations, our grassroots street pantries, our tremendous services like the early morning drop-in centre and the Vinnies Roadhouse, are all facing increasing demand. They are serving people who have jobs and who, despite that, cannot afford to feed themselves or their kids, once they have paid their rent and other bills. It is in that context that the government took a decision to axe the Rent Relief Fund, and we have seen a significant community response to that, seeking a reversal of that decision.

I want to thank the Attorney-General, and the minister for housing, Minister Berry, for their response today, which I think is so close to being a commitment, but we still need to see the details come through. It was quite a read—seven pages—and it was not until the seventh page that we got the result. I was on tenterhooks, reading through what was a long statement, but that statement made a compelling case for why the Rent Relief Fund has made a difference. I hope that, as the work continues, the very strong and successful features of the Rent Relief Fund appear in the reinvigorated fund, and that we get an answer as soon as possible as to what that will look like. Minister Berry, who

now has responsibility for this, has assured me that the work is ongoing, and I look forward to seeing the details come through.

I want to put on the table, though, that, in the meantime, we should see the reinstatement of the Rent Relief Fund as an interim measure, until a new program is in place, because we know that Care was providing up to two grants a day. That means, in the 150-odd days since the Rent Relief Fund was axed, literally several hundred people have missed out on that vital support. I urge the government to consider either bringing the date forward from 1 July—although I suspect that is linked to the budget—or using the midyear budget to provide funding for an interim measure.

In terms of the other petitions that are on the program today, I note the response to the proposal to relocate the light rail traction power substation. Ms Carrick originally tabled the petition and, as I said at the time, I have been out to visit the Yarralumla residents. I was encouraged by the response, which suggests that there are alternative sites available. It is really important that, through the feedback from this petition and the consultation process on the environmental impact statement, the issues that have been raised by the community and the flagging of alternative sites are acknowledged, and that we can, hopefully, see a better outcome for the community when we see the final EIS come through.

The issue of indoor sporting facilities for Canberra's north side has also come up in the committee that I am on, the economics committee, where we are looking at barriers to participation in sport. There is a theme coming through, where we have not seen sporting facilities keep up with demand and growth in our community, and we are seeing the loss of sporting facilities.

In this case, I put the question to the Tradies Club that they are making a significant development and, in all the financials, perhaps they should reconsider, in the returns they will make on that site, whether they should in fact re-fund new squash courts in the redevelopment. I think it is possible. On an enormous site like that, it would be great to see those sorts of facilities being incorporated into the overall project. Whilst it has been put to me that it is not viable, I think we need to consider what is important, and make sure that we are providing community assets.

I want to acknowledge a couple of other issues in my electorate—the reimagining of Wakefield Gardens and the pilot of 30 kilometre an hour speed limits, both brought forward by Mr Emerson. These are important local issues that are about making our community spaces better for the community, inviting community participation and community activation. I am very pleased to see the responses coming back which are moving these issues forward.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Justice—bail reform

Ministerial statement

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (10.42): Mr Speaker, congratulations on your role. I, too,

look forward to your impartiality and to your very statesman-like approach to this chamber. I give you my word that I will assist you, where I can, as Manager of Government Business.

I rise to provide an update on the progress of proposed bail reforms. In May this year, I signalled the government's intent to modernise our bail laws and to introduce legislation to achieve that as soon as practicable. Bail is fundamental to the operation of the criminal justice system because it strikes a crucial balance between protecting the community and upholding the presumption of innocence, and that a person should not be punished before they are proven guilty.

Allowing accused persons to continue living in the community—with appropriate supervision and tailored conditions—prevents unnecessary pressure on custodial services and reduces the well-documented negative impact that detention can have on a person and their family. At the same time, bail laws provide a structured way to protect victims, witnesses and the broader community from harm by enabling detention in circumstances where a person poses an unacceptable risk.

The Bail Act 1992 provides the legislative framework, but the overall operation of bail involves a much broader service system. Both the legislative framework and supporting bail services are informed by government policy decisions. The government has a role in ensuring that the legislative framework for bail strikes the right balance between the rights of the victim, the rights of the alleged offender and the protection of the public; and, of course, putting in place services that support the operation of bail.

Bail decisions have a high impact on defendants, victims, witnesses and the broader community's perceptions about their own safety and about the justice system. Of course, there has been ongoing public discussion, including here in this place, about the need for bail reform in the ACT, with key community and stakeholder concerns being around victim and community safety; the rights of the defendants; trust and confidence in the justice system; addressing high rates of remand and recidivism; and reducing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system.

On 5 May, the ACT government released a public discussion paper via the YourSay conversation website, seeking feedback on potential reforms to the decision-making criteria in the Bail Act. The consultation reflected the diverse views that Canberrans have on bail and the criminal justice system. The submissions received ranged from personal accounts of interactions with the bail and criminal justice systems to more technical legal responses. I sincerely thank the people and organisations who took the time to have their say on bail in the ACT.

On 24 September, a petition on ACT bail reform was received by this Assembly. The petition seeks a range of changes to bail legislation and processes in the ACT, to strengthen risk-based decision-making, reduce offending and support vulnerable young people and families. I acknowledge sponsoring member Mr Milligan and thank those who contributed to the development of the petition and then supported it. While I will also respond to that petition in this statement, a formal, more detailed response will be tabled with the Clerk.

Importantly, for those who have contributed to the process so far, we have listened, and we have heard you. We have taken your insights seriously and they have shaped our approach. After much careful consideration, I can confirm the government's intention to introduce a bail reform bill in early 2026. I appreciate that, for some, these reforms have not come quickly enough. However, I have made it clear that I would not rush changes to this legislation. These reforms require balancing competing interests and rights and doing so in a way that preserves the independence of the courts in making bail decisions. Of course, we have been monitoring the criticism towards and the consequences of the kneejerk reform in other states and the Northern Territory.

The government's overarching objective is to bring forward a balanced package of reforms that addresses key community and stakeholder concerns around victim and community safety, the rights of the accused, and gives the community confidence that the courts are making informed, risk-based decisions, including in the context of repeat offenders. Decision-makers are already required to consider a range of matters and are authorised to consider any other matter when making decisions. The Bail Act allows decision-makers to place more weight on those matters of greatest relevance to all the circumstances of the case before them—that is, a case-by-case approach.

The amendment bill that I intend to introduce will remain aligned with this principle, while also providing clarity that decision-makers will be required, as part of their processes in making a bail decision, to explicitly consider additional factors relevant to concerns about the safety and wellbeing of victims and others, including the broader community, and to consider additional matters in relation to an accused person who is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. On that, I wish to reflect that there is an enormous deal of harm and hurt in the community at the moment. I wish to assure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that this is about understanding, acknowledging and responding to cultural needs, and ensuring that the response to an application for bail for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person reflects all their circumstances.

The amendment bill will also require decision-makers to consider an accused person's disability needs, health needs and relevant related circumstances, including what available supports exist in the community. It will require the decision-maker to consider the effect of custody or compliance with bail conditions on a person's pregnancy and unborn baby; and it will require the decision-maker to consider the defendant's history of compliance with undertakings to appear, bail conditions, orders of any Australian court, including the Family Court, and any offence alleged to have been committed while the defendant was on bail in relation to another offence.

I also intend that the bill will include that decision-makers will be specifically required to take into account the following when making bail decisions related to children: the child's age, maturity and developmental capacity at the time of the alleged offence; the least restrictive bail conditions or the shortest time in custody necessary in the circumstances; preservation and promotion of positive relationships between the child and the child's family members and any other significant persons; supporting the child to live in safe, stable and secure living arrangements; supporting the child's education, training or lawful employment without unnecessary disruption; minimising any stigma associated with custody or bail; the risk of harm to the child when in, or as a result of having been in, custody; the likelihood that the child will be sentenced to a term of

imprisonment and the likely duration of that sentence; and the ongoing effect of physical or mental illness, disability, trauma, abuse, neglect, loss or family violence, or being dealt with under a child welfare law on the child.

The amendments will be designed in line with procedural fairness and in accordance with the Human Rights Act. This approach is intended to elevate the concept of “do no further harm” to both the victim and the accused person when deciding a bail application.

Further, the bill will amend the Bail Act to expand the list of individuals who can make representations about bail and be updated about changes in bail status by expanding the definition of “victim” for bail purposes, including to those with parental or carer responsibility when the primary victim is a child, and including those who have witnessed the criminal offence.

These expected amendments in the bill will address some more recent, as well as some longstanding, commitments. Of the more recent ones, this includes recommendation 2 of the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety Inquiry into the Administration of Bail in the ACT, and recommendations 8.2(a) and (b) of the Jumbunna Institute’s 2025 Independent Review into Over-representation of First Nations People in the ACT Criminal Justice System.

Going to the petition, I note that the petition includes legislative and non-legislative proposals. Many of the reforms suggested in the petition—the legislative ones—were already under consideration by government and indeed formed part of the discussion paper consulted on earlier this year. For example, the petition proposes that proven repeat offending or a prior breach of bail be a legislated ground for refusing bail. No bail system, of course, can guarantee that people granted bail will not engage in further offending. Offending while on bail catches a very wide range of conduct, including many less serious offences and offences which have no relationship with the primary offending for which someone was granted bail.

Nevertheless, the government acknowledges the importance of putting in place appropriate policies and initiatives that minimise the numbers of people who are committing further offences while on bail. As canvassed earlier, amendments that I expect to be contained in our bill will require decision-makers to consider the defendant’s history of compliance with court orders, and any offence alleged to have been committed while the defendant was on bail in relation to another offence when making bail decisions.

However, I need to be clear that the government will not be implementing a reverse presumption, as this would likely result in escalating criminal justice responses to minor matters. What this would mean in practice would be people being detained on charges for which they are subsequently either found not guilty or are not given a custodial sentence—for example, a fine or an infringement.

Other proposals already exist in the current laws or form part of considerations of decision-makers when assessing bail. For example, the proposal in the petition in relation to amending the Bail Act to provide for curfews is not necessary, as the Bail Act already allows for the imposition of a curfew as a condition of bail.

The petition also made legislative and non-legislative proposals relating to enhancing courts' consideration of risks, including mandating the use of assessment tools. It is already administratively possible to use risk assessment tools when making decisions under the Bail Act. The government will work with stakeholders to determine how these tools could be better utilised, particularly in relation to family and sexual violence offences, to support decision-makers.

However, the feedback has been that requiring decision-makers to undertake a risk assessment for all offences would have a significant resource impact on both ACT Policing and the Director of Public Prosecutions, let alone the ACT Courts and Tribunal. It is also unclear whether a single tool would provide sufficient flexibility for decision-makers when considering different sets of circumstances and different types of offences.

The government is continuing to progress some of the non-legislative proposals contained in the petition, recommendations of the 2024 standing committee inquiry into the administration of bail and the Jumbunna review. For example, the government is already looking at ways to improve data collection in relation to bail and is also considering expanding the Ngurrumbai Bail Support Program to children and young people.

The government acknowledges the importance of therapeutic support, rehabilitation and diversion over punitive responses for children in the justice system. In the ACT, young people on supervised bail are supported by youth justice practitioners, who assist with accessing assessment, crisis accommodation, transport, and alcohol and other drug treatment services. The Child, Youth and Families After Hours Service also provides crisis support outside business hours for those subject to youth justice orders, including bail. These existing services provide ongoing and responsive support, including after-hours coverage for young people on bail.

The Therapeutic Support Panel for Children and Young People and the Safer Youth Response Service play a diversionary and early intervention role, particularly for children under 14 years of age, in alignment with the ACT raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. The primary cohort for these services is children up to the age of 13, which ensures that the therapeutic supports are prioritised over punitive responses. When capacity allows, young people aged 14 and over may also be referred, thereby extending access to therapeutic pathways that reduce reliance on charge and bail. The Therapeutic Support Panel is also a referrer to restorative justice conferencing in the ACT under the Crimes (Restorative Justice) Act. I note that restorative justice conferencing continues to receive astronomically good satisfaction rates, in the order of 99 per cent.

The ACT government already funds free parenting advice, programs and supports through three child and family centres. The petition proposes mandating the use of these supports with the threat of criminal sanctions. The government considers that this approach is unlikely to result in effective outcomes. Therapeutic services generally emphasise voluntary engagement as more effective. Youth justice practitioners support young people and their families to access culturally safe, trauma-informed programs where appropriate, and work to encourage participation through collaborative and

family-inclusive practice.

In closing, I refer back to my remarks earlier this year—that the decision to grant or deny bail relies on an informed assessment of risk. The better informed that decision, the greater likelihood there is for persons who present the greatest risk to be managed appropriately, for detention to be limited where it is unnecessary, and for any conditions applied to someone released on bail to be appropriate for the circumstances and level of risk, let alone enforceable.

It is my sincere belief that the actions being taken by this government, including the proposed amendments to the Bail Act outlined today, will better support the decision-making process and lead to better bail outcomes. I look forward to presenting the amendment bill next year.

I present the following paper:

Bail reform and other related initiatives—Ministerial statement, 2 December 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (10.58): I would like to make a few brief remarks in response to the Attorney-General's ministerial statement on bail reform and other issues. We will have a substantive discussion when the bail reform bill, which the Attorney indicated will be introduced next year, comes forward, but I think it is important to reflect today. And it is important that the community feels heard and is indeed heard, which is one of the benefits of the discussion paper the Attorney has released, whilst ensuring that we are using expert data and evidence. I am sure all those factors will inform the discussion, going forward.

I welcome the Attorney's commitment in her statement this morning to resist kneejerk legislation. It hopefully reveals a commitment to evidence, which has been missing in other jurisdictions, including that of her Labor counterparts, as they run towards cowardly reforms that will see more people, particularly younger people, locked up in custody. The extraordinary approach we are seeing in a number of jurisdictions to target youth offenders and ensure that in some places they are given adult time for adult crime, and various other measures, defies all the research, all the evidence and all the common sense that is available to us. I welcome the fact that the Attorney is indicating that she is not intending to go in that direction.

We know that we have a rising remand population in the Alexander Maconochie Centre and that bail reform will have an impact on the direction that goes. The ACT Inspector of Custodial Services' 2025 *Healthy prison review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre* shows that, as at 31 December 2024, 50 per cent of the AMC's population was being held on remand, compared to a national average of 41 per cent. To put that in context, it means all those people have not yet been found guilty of the charges that have been laid against them, nor have they been sentenced. We know that, along the way, a notable number of those people, if found guilty, will end up getting a sentence that simply reflects time served, perhaps without knowing what the sentence might have been.

Thinking about how we respond to the significant remand population is a really important question. It is one that goes well beyond bail discussions, but it is also one that we must be mindful of as we think about how we deal with bail. It goes to other things—issues such as electronic monitoring. During annual reports hearings, it was very disappointing to receive an update on electronic monitoring. It is a significant missed opportunity that we have not seen electronic monitoring implemented in this jurisdiction. As the former Attorney, I know work was being done to get it in place. I was very pleased when the Chief Minister, in May 2024, came out of national cabinet and announced that the ACT would be moving forward with it. The preparatory work had been done, but the funding was missing. In May 2024, the Chief Minister said the ACT would have it and it would be operational within months, not years.

Sadly, we are now 1.5 years down the track from May 2024 and, as the Minister for Corrections explained to the committee during annual reports hearings, the money is still not available to actually implement, or make operational, electronic monitoring. The discussion of the evidence was that, if the money were available today, we would still be 12 months away, and possibly 18 months away, from being able to implement electronic monitoring. Now, I understand that—because some detailed work needs to be done to choose the right operational model, as there is a range of variations in how one can approach electronic monitoring, as well as which cohort of people it should be applied to and which cohort of offences and other considerations should be taken into account.

There is complexity, but the failure to actually provide the money to implement it means it will take years, yet the Chief Minister's statement in May 2024 was that it would be in operation in months. It will be years before it is implemented, because, even if the money were announced today, it would take three years. I call on the government to think about how it is funded. It could have been operational by now if it had been funded properly at the time. It would do wonders to improve the safety of our community, but it would also reduce our remand rates and improve rehabilitation. The same goes with the drafting of home detention orders.

I was pleased to hear the Attorney say she is considering expanding the Ngurrumbai Bail Support program to children and young people; but, again, this is not a new idea and it is one the government could have funded in its budget but did not. This is where we see priorities being tested and a government's values being clear. Despite finding well over \$8 million for horseracing in this year's budget, we did not see the Ngurrumbai Bail Support program being extended to children and young people, and we did not see electronic monitoring being funded. We do not see the right priorities on display here, and I urge the government to think carefully about how some of these programs can be moved forward in a timely manner to reflect very pressing issues in this space.

Justice reinvestment initiatives will make our community safer by investing in them so that people at risk of offending can be supported to live well, surrounded by the services they need and the family and friends who love them. This is what ultimately makes our community safer, because, when people are not offending, we do not have victims. It is a self-evident statement. It is an odd one to lay out, but it is a classic case. Everyone knows it and we all talk about it: prevention is better than cure. That is what we need

in this space.

I look forward to further discussions about this. I am encouraged by the Attorney's statement today and will be intrigued to see the bill when it arrives next year.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Early childhood education—out-of-hours care—update Ministerial statement

MS BERRY (Ginninderra—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (11.04): I rise today to update the Assembly on the ACT government's response to a motion that was moved in this place on 18 March 2025 regarding out-of-hours care for preschool students. Every child deserves access to high quality education and the lifelong opportunities that stem from it. Education is one of the most powerful tools we have to shape futures, break cycles of disadvantage and empower individuals to reach their full potential. The benefits of a strong educational foundation extend far beyond academic achievement. It sets up children for lifelong learning and success.

In recognition of this, the ACT government has committed to strengthening early childhood education through its long-term strategy, *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT*. This strategy ensures that every child in the ACT has the best possible start in life and recognises the critical role that high quality early learning plays in shaping positive outcomes for families, individuals and the broader community. A key initiative under phase 1 of *Set up for Success* was to conduct an out-of-school hours care (OSHC) trial for four-year-old preschool children at four ACT public schools, delivered in the preschool environment. This initiative aimed to support children's learning and development and to provide vital support to families during the preschool year, enabling greater workforce participation and flexibility.

The trial, conducted in 2020, marked a significant step in addressing a longstanding issue for many families in navigating the logistical and financial challenges associated with accessing government-funded preschool. The trial examined the feasibility of extending OSHC services to include preschool-age children in a manner that was developmentally appropriate, safe and consistent with the principles of early childhood education. This included delivering the services in a familiar preschool setting to minimise the transition for children, promote continuity of care and alleviate the logistical burden on families who might otherwise be required to manage multiple care arrangements across different environments. An evaluation of the trial conducted in 2021 provided valuable insights into the operational, regulatory and pedagogical factors associated with the provision of OSHC to preschool-age children.

During the 2024 ACT election, the ACT government publicly committed to working with the early childhood education and care sector to support supervised before- and after-preschool care at public preschools during this term of government. Earlier this year, the Education Directorate sought information from OSHC providers to better understand service delivery arrangements at ACT public schools. Through this process, it was identified that 52 ACT public schools—that is, 76 per cent—already offered

OSHC programs for preschool-age children. Of these programs, 20 are delivered in the preschool environment and the remaining are delivered in a shared environment, with other primary school-age children.

Throughout 2026, we will work with schools and OSHC providers to further explore the challenges associated with delivering OSHC to preschool-age children and to support and encourage best practice delivery in the preschool space. We will continue to work in partnership with preschools, OSHC providers, parents and carers to ensure that the expansion is responsive to local needs, maintains high standards of quality and safety, and supports seamless transitions and information sharing between settings. I look forward to expanding service provisions so that all preschool children can access outside of school hours care when needed.

I present the following paper:

Out of hours care for preschool students—Access—Improvement—Assembly resolution of 18 March 2025—Government response—Ministerial statement, 2 December 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (11.09): I rise briefly to thank the minister for the update on my motion earlier in the year and welcome the news that 76 per cent of ACT public schools are now already offering an outside-of-school hours care program for preschool-age children. It is really good progress in helping families access the care hours they need while children access preschool. As the minister mentioned, preschool is not just about learning; it is also so much more. It is such an important step in a child's development. It is so important that we do everything we can to make sure that children can access preschool and thrive. I hear from many families who talk about how wonderful the preschool year was for their child, and I can say from my own experience that the preschool year is such an important milestone for a child.

I welcome everything that the minister has outlined about the work that will be done next year, in 2026, with schools, OSHC providers and families. One day, I hope to see a time when all children in ACT public preschools can access outside-of-school hours care so that families can balance the care hours they need while children have access to high quality and wonderful preschool.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Schools—coloured sand—management and remediation

Ministerial statement

MS BERRY (Ginninderra—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (11.10): I rise today to make a statement to the Assembly about the management and remediation of coloured sand products across ACT public schools. On 12 November 2025, WorkSafe ACT released a safety notice about Kadink Decorative

Sand sold in Officeworks. By 16 November 2025, the ACT Competition and Consumer Commission released a product recall for Anko Magic Sand sold in Kmart and Target. Both safety notices advised that traces of asbestos had been found in the two brands of coloured sand.

These products were in wide use across ACT public schools, particularly because of their benefits for students with sensory needs. Faced with this challenge, the government acted in accordance with our regulatory requirements and put the safety of our staff and students first. This meant we had to make the difficult but necessary decision to close impacted spaces in schools, and in many cases whole schools, for a period of days. I acknowledge that this was disruptive for students, staff and families across Canberra. It was not a decision taken lightly, but safety must always come first.

I take this opportunity to thank everyone across Canberra for their patience and understanding. I thank everyone in our school communities, including students, parents and carers, as well as our school workforce. I thank our stakeholders, including ACT Parents, the Australian Education Union, the United Workers Union and the Community and Public Sector Union, for their understanding and for working collaboratively with us as we managed this process.

The laws in the ACT around asbestos removal are some of the most rigorous in the country. While we understand the risk of exposure to the traces of asbestos in these products was identified as low, under ACT work health and safety laws, any products containing asbestos must be assessed and removed by licensed asbestos assessors. Spaces and rooms where the coloured sand was located needed to be isolated until the product could be safely removed and the space was cleared for use by the licensed asbestos assessors. How this played out on the ground was different for each school. There were schools that did not have any sand products at all, and they were not impacted. There were others where there was very little sand or sand that was easily able to be isolated. These schools were able to operate effectively without access to those impacted spaces. But for other schools the loss of available learning spaces to this process was significant, so much so that they were unable to operate safely. This led to some schools being partially closed and others being fully closed for periods of up to several school days.

I will take a moment to acknowledge Malkara School and the Malkara School community, who were unfortunately significantly impacted by this situation. While Malkara School and other specialist schools were prioritised in the initial remediation works, it was subsequently discovered that coloured sand had been mixed in the outdoor sandpits and was spread extensively across the outdoor spaces at Malkara. This meant the school had to be closed for a second time to undertake extensive remediation works. These works included clearing out the school's sandpit, digging out and replacing turfed areas, pressure cleaning all hard surfaces, and scraping off the top layer of all soft-fall spaces before the space could be cleared. Then the playground needed to be re-landscaped before students could return. I thank all Malkara students, staff and the broader school community for their patience while we resolved this issue.

I also want to acknowledge out-of-school hours care providers across our public school system and early childhood education and care providers who deliver services in public school facilities who have been impacted by these events. I am pleased to report that

the ACT government has been working with our federal government counterparts to minimise financial impacts on service providers and families by ensuring they can apply for gap-fee waivers, extra absences and Child Care Subsidy, CCS, claims.

I want to be clear that there is still a bit more work to do across our ACT public schools. While our schools are open and operating, some still have isolated areas waiting to be remediated. In addition, while every effort was made to identify and isolate recalled and unidentified sand products, given the size of our schools and their significant storage areas, there is a possibility that more of this sand will be found. If it is, appropriate work health and safety processes will be followed. I will say, though, that, even if more sand products are located, I am confident our schools will continue to stay open for students.

I must stress the extraordinary amount of work that has been done across the system to address this challenge. As part of that work, the Education Directorate's hazardous materials team engaged contractors who have managed the testing of sand products. Hundreds of air-monitoring tests have been undertaken across our public schools, and I can confirm for the Assembly that this monitoring has shown no positive results for airborne asbestos fibres. In addition to air monitoring, testing has been conducted on a limited number of sand samples. Of the 10 samples tested so far, chrysotile asbestos has been detected in four of them. This testing confirms what experts told us from the outset—that these products do contain asbestos and should be properly handled in line with ACT regulations for suspected asbestos and asbestos removal. I note that that information was not provided in the initial statement that I circulated to members. This information was provided after that circulation, so I wanted to draw that to the attention of members.

I also thank all staff across our public schools for their patience and professionalism and thank all staff in the Education Support Office for their professionalism and work in coordinating this incident response. I thank the licensed asbestos professionals who worked around the clock to help us remediate and clear schools for reopening. I also give a shout-out to SES volunteers who helped with school inspections, and to Transport Canberra's Special Needs Transport workers, who were very supportive in our specialist schools. It was an enormous collective effort, and both the government and the community are extremely grateful for their work.

I think I can confidently speak for the ACT public school system when I say that everyone is very happy to be back at school now after this unexpected disruption, but is also very much looking forward to a well-earned break during the upcoming school holidays.

I present the following paper:

ACT public schools sand management and remediation—Ministerial statement,
2 December 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (11.17): I thank the minister for her statement. I appreciate the quick response that the directorate and school communities took on this issue. I cannot imagine how difficult and frustrating it would have been to have to assess risks and coordinate school closures and testing at short notice with imperfect information. My intent in speaking is not to cast aspersions on the minister or directorate through this process—not for a second. Frankly, I suspect they would have expected far more criticism from this place if they had not exercised caution on a live asbestos risk in schools. But I do wish to speak briefly to some of the concerns that constituents have raised with us about the way that school closures were handled, and I hope they will be heard and taken on board as we plan for a public school system that is resilient and responsive to crisis.

The most reoccurring theme that I have heard from parents and carers is communication challenges. We heard from Namadgi School and Ngunnawal Primary School parents in particular that they felt left in the dark and unable to plan ahead. Especially for parents with casual work and students who have struggled with routine changes, this lack of clear early communication was quite painful. People were not able to go to their jobs; they cancelled meetings; they lost shifts and income. The order in which schools reopened confused many parents. More information on the reasoning behind that at the time would have been greatly appreciated. What it meant in practice was that parents and carers did not know how long they had to stay home or find someone to watch their kids, and it compromised their ability to plan their week.

We also hope and expect the government will do their due diligence and follow up with the ACCC, noting that this sand has been on the market since 2020. It would be very helpful to understand why asbestos was only just detected in coloured sand, despite it being on the market for five years. I appreciate that is not a problem for the ACT government in the first instance, but I hope that we can work on getting some accountability from federal processes. It would be helpful to understand whether there are processes and regulations or, indeed, ACCC processes and regulations need to change, and whether the government should be more proactive in not permitting toys and food onto the market here in the ACT unless they are proven safe.

I would love to hear from government—and I believe we have heard it today—a commitment to make changes to the existing system based on what we have learned from this asbestos incident. We want to understand what government has learned about communication and crisis response, what will happen next time, and what guarantees can be made to ensure that parents and carers will be brought along with the directorate as they navigate this new situation.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

ACT water resources—order to table documents—amendment

The Clerk: Pursuant to standing order 213B, I have received correspondence from the Chief Minister requesting a variation to the scope of and reporting date for the 25 September 2025 resolution of the Assembly ordering the production of documents relating to ACT water resources.

I present the following papers:

ACT water resources—Documents—Order to table—

Variation request, pursuant to standing order 213B—Letter to the Clerk from the Chief Minister, dated 25 November 2025.

Proposed amendments, dated 28 November 2025.

MR SPEAKER: In accordance with standing order 213B, I propose the question:

That the request, as reported by the Clerk, to vary the terms of the order be agreed to.

Debate (on motion by **Ms Cheyne**) adjourned to 4 December 2025.

Climate change mitigation—order to table documents—documents tabled

The Clerk: Pursuant to standing order 213A and the resolution of the Assembly of 24 June 2025, I present correspondence and documents from the Head of Service dated 31 October 2025 relating to documents and briefs to ministers on climate change mitigation:

Climate change mitigation—Documents and briefs to ministers—Order to table—

Transmittal letter from the Head of Service, ACT Government to the Clerk, dated 31 October 2025.

Index of returned documents (*see* Appendix 1).

Interpretation of scope.

Privilege claimed on certain returned documents—Letter to the Clerk from the Chief Minister, dated 31 October 2025.

Returned documents (4 folders).

Copy of documents which had been circulated to Members on 14 November 2025—

Privilege claimed on certain returned documents—Further submission letter to the Clerk from the Chief Minister, dated 14 November 2025.

Index of disputed returned documents (*see* Appendix 2).

Disputed returned documents (1 folder).

Copy of documents which had been circulated to Members on 28 November 2025—

Independent Legal Arbiter—Report—Climate change mitigation—Documents and briefs to ministers—Disputed claims of privilege, dated 27 November 2025, prepared by the Hon Keith Mason AC KC.

Disputed returned documents—Decision of the Independent Legal Arbiter (4 folders, including 1 folder of documents partly redacted where the claims were partly upheld).

The correspondence was circulated and documents made available to members on 31 October 2025.

Climate change mitigation—order to table documents— decision of independent legal arbiter

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) agreed to:

That the Assembly authorise for publication the report of the Independent Legal Arbiter concerning the disputed claims of privilege in relation to certain documents ordered to be produced, that was tabled by the Clerk.

Public Accounts and Administration—Standing Committee Reporting date—amendment

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (11.23), by leave: I move:

That the resolution of the Assembly of 13 May 2025, requesting the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration undertake an inquiry into the administration of the Home Buyer Concession Scheme, be amended by omitting in part (4) “the first sitting day of December 2025” and substituting “16 December 2025”.

This motion, circulated in my name, amends the requested reporting date for the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration inquiry into the Home Buyer Concession Scheme’s administration. On 13 May 2025, the Assembly resolved for the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration to consider an inquiry into the administration of the Home Buyer Concession Scheme. At this meeting on 19 May 2025, the committee resolved to inquire into the Home Buyers Concession Scheme’s administration. In accordance with paragraph 4 of the Assembly resolution, the committee was requested to report by the first sitting day of December 2025, being 2 December 2025.

My fellow committee members and I are of the view that, due to the limited opportunity for the secretariat to draft over the period covering annual reports public hearings, an extension to the inquiry’s reporting date would be beneficial to ensure that a carefully considered chair’s draft report, appropriately examining all evidence received, can be produced for the committee’s consideration. An extension would also enable the committee time to properly consider the draft report.

I further note that, due to the Assembly having not sat over the past two weeks because of annual reports hearings, today is the earliest opportunity I have had to bring forward this motion. I therefore request that the Assembly resolution be amended to grant the committee an extension to 16 December 2025.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Transport and City Services—Standing Committee Statement by chair

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi) (11.25): Pursuant to standing order 246A, I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Standing Committee on Transport and City Services relating

to the inquiry into the effectiveness of Fix My Street.

This inquiry commenced under the Standing Committee on Environment, Planning, Transport and City Services and was transferred to the Standing Committee on Transport and City Services on 26 June 2025. In the Assembly resolution referring the inquiry, the Assembly requested that the committee report by the first sitting day of December, that being today. The committee held hearings for the inquiry on 14 and 15 October 2025, as well as a demonstration of Fix My Street with officials from the City and Environment Directorate on 6 November 2025. We were all very grateful. It was a really good hearing and we really appreciated the demonstration of Fix My Street.

The committee received over 50 submissions to this inquiry, including some detailed technical analyses of the existing Fix My Street system, and detailed proposals for alternative approaches. Given the volume and complexity of the evidence received and the need to do this evidence justice, the committee will report on this inquiry in the February 2026 sittings.

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee Reporting date—amendment

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (11.27): I move:

That, notwithstanding standing order 174(d), the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs shall present its report on the Liquor Amendment Bill 2025 by 20 February 2026.

In accordance with the Assembly resolution establishing general purpose standing committees, this bill was referred to the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs on 21 October 2025. At a private meeting on 5 November 2025, the committee resolved to undertake an inquiry into the bill. The committee called for public submissions for the inquiry on 5 November 2025.

The resolution for the establishment of standing committees states that all bills presented to the Assembly stand referred to the relevant standing committee for inquiry and report within three months from the presentation of the bill. The reference of the bill under this resolution means that the reporting date for this bill is 20 January 2026. My motion asks for the reporting date on this bill to be extended until 20 February 2026.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Reporting date—amendment

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (11.28): I move:

That, notwithstanding standing order 174(d), the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs shall present its report on the Magistrates Court (Indicative Sentencing) Amendment Bill 2025 by 27 February 2026.

In accordance with the Assembly resolution establishing general purpose standing committees, this bill was referred to the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs on

30 October 2025. At a private meeting on 5 November 2025, the committee resolved to undertake an inquiry into the bill. The committee called for public submissions for the inquiry on 6 November 2025.

The resolution for the establishment of standing committees states that all bills presented to the Assembly stand referred to the relevant standing committee for inquiry and report within three months from the presentation of the bill. The reference of the bill under this resolution means the reporting date for this bill is 29 January 2026. My motion asks for the reporting date on this bill to be extended until 27 February 2026.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Administration and Procedure—Standing Committee Report 3

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER (Mr Cain): I present the following report:

Administration and Procedure—Standing Committee—Report 3—*Report on the conduct of Ms Cheyne MLA*, dated 27 November 2025, together with extracts of the relevant minutes of proceedings.

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (11.30), by leave: I move:

That the report be adopted.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (11.31): In accordance with the recommendation of the Standing Committee of Admin and Procedure, I sincerely and unconditionally apologise to the Assembly. I reiterate my apology to Ms Lee of 11 September and, for completeness and transparency, I present the following document:

Apology—Letter to Ms Lee from Ms Cheyne, dated 11 September 2025.

MS LEE (Kurrajong) (11.31): I take note of the report of the Standards Commissioner. I will not go through the detail of the entire findings of the report. Members can read that for themselves. Let me be clear at the outset that my complaint to the Standards Commissioner was not about facing criticism from another MLA. Having been in politics for years, including as leader through an election campaign, I have—as have many others in this chamber—faced my fair share of criticism, warranted or not. Of course, I myself have certainly not been shy in enthusiastically partaking in the sport of politics. I have engaged in robust debate inside and outside of this chamber. But at all times I have tried—and, for the most part, I think I have succeeded—to engage in fair and respectful debate. I hope that I have treated my colleagues on all sides with a level of respect and with openness and transparency.

To be attacked so personally by someone who was not willing to put their name to that criticism is what this is about. The fact that the minister sent a text to be read out on

public radio and specifically insisted that her name not be revealed, that the text remain anonymous, shows that she was not prepared to put her name to her personal opinions of me and on matters which she herself has conceded that she did not have intimate knowledge of. It was incredibly disappointing, especially from a minister.

Whether we like it or not, as elected members, we have a responsibility to set the standard. We have a responsibility to be an example for the people we represent in our electorates and the broader Canberra community—let's be honest: flipping the bird by anyone else would not have made the national news—and, for a minister, that responsibility is even higher. Being a minister is a privilege. It is being able to directly make decisions that impact Canberrans. It is about being a custodian of billions of taxpayer dollars to expend on services and projects to benefit our community.

That is why, of course, in addition to the members code of conduct, there is a ministerial code of conduct, to which all ministers are responsible and of which the Chief Minister is responsible for administering. While I appreciated the way the Chief Minister dealt with this matter in such a swift and concise manner—including publicly stating very strongly that he did not consider this conduct to be acceptable—it was disappointing when he later insisted that it was not a breach of the members code of conduct. As we now know, the Standards Commissioner's report shows otherwise.

I will address one particularly hurtful aspect of that text message. To make a disparaging comment about my personal leave that I took earlier this year—leave that was approved by every member of this Assembly—was hurtful, damaging and, frankly, dangerous. In this place we have a longstanding convention that members respect the sensitivity and privacy of other members who take personal leave, particularly when it is for health reasons. It is no secret that the events of last year following the election had a significant traumatic impact on me, my family and my staff. Much of it was played out very publicly, but there was also so much more that was happening behind the scenes that the minister, nor anyone else, could even presume to have intimate knowledge of.

As much as we all want to put on a brave face when things happen, we all know that this is not a healthy way to deal with issues. So, on the advice of my medical team and in consultation with my family and colleagues, I took a period of personal leave, as many others have before me, to get the support that I needed. Now I feel that I have been given no choice but to publicly defend that decision—again, a decision that was supported by all members of this Assembly—to take leave—and now I feel I have no choice but to disclose the personal, sensitive and, frankly, traumatic issues that I was dealing with and continue to deal with.

I was moved when the minister delivered her very personal and powerful adjournment speech last year where she opened up about her own mental health struggles, and I applauded her brave decision to get the help she needed. It took courage to speak about it, and I have no doubt that she has inspired many Canberrans with her bravery. So to have that minister—one who herself has detailed her own struggles—attack me for taking personal leave was the lowest of blows and undermines the integrity of the entire Assembly and the work of every member in this place to ensure that we set the standard when it comes to fostering a safe, inclusive and welcoming workplace. To use my personal leave as a political scoring point and an opportunity and not have the courage

to put her name on it shows a lack of empathy and understanding of the struggles that she herself bravely came forward to talk about.

In closing, I urge every member in this chamber to remember that each person you meet is fighting a battle you might not see; and, instead of using our struggles as a political weapon to cause damage, especially when a person is vulnerable, let us all remember to support each other to show kindness and understanding, no matter what our political colour.

Public Accounts and Administration—Standing Committee Report 4

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (11.37): I present the following report:

Public Accounts and Administration—Standing Committee—Report 4—*Inquiry into Payroll Tax Amendment Bill 2025*, dated 24 November 2025, including a dissenting report (*Ms Tough*), together with extracts of the relevant minutes of proceedings.

I move:

That the report be noted.

This is the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration for the Eleventh Assembly. The committee received six submissions to the inquiry and held public hearings on 3 November. The report made one recommendation: that, should the Assembly decide to pass the bill, it should consider amending the bill so that the increase to the payroll tax rate commences on 1 July 2026 to align with the start of the 2026-27 financial year.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all those who contributed to this inquiry and put in their submissions. I would also like to thank Broadcasting, Hansard and, of course, our secretariat for their assistance with this inquiry.

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (11.39): I rise to speak to my dissenting report that was part of this report into the payroll tax inquiry. I want to acknowledge the work of my colleagues on the committee, Mr Milligan and Ms Carrick, for their collegiate approach to this report.

I want to put on the record my dissent to the recommendation. Although I completely agree with the evidence that we received during the inquiry that a change to payroll tax midyear is quite jarring for businesses and not what they would normally expect, we did hear evidence that taxation legislation often does change with little notice. This was given about six months notice for implementation. I recognise that this was part of budget negotiations to ensure that the revenue that was no longer going to be coming in from the health levy being reduced needed to be made up somehow. If that does not commence in this financial year, then it does not form part of the budget for this year, and so there is no point having this bill. I dissent to the report and urge the Assembly to pass this bill. Thank you.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Environment and Planning—Standing Committee

Statement by chair

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (11.40): Pursuant to standing order 246A, I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning relating to its inquiry into Draft Major Plan Amendment 04—Missing Middle Housing Reforms. This major planning amendment was referred to the committee by the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development on 28 October 2025 under section 70 of the Planning Act 2023. It is a significant planning reform that proposes changes that would reshape the character of our city and seeks to ensure our growing population has access to the right housing in the right location.

These reforms are not just technical amendments; they would influence how we live, how our neighbourhoods would evolve and how future generations would experience our city. They are part of the largest zoning reforms and Territory Plan updates in the history of self-government—more significant than those made in the recent review of the Territory Plan. Recognising their significance, the committee resolved on 6 November 2025 to prepare a report on the draft amendment.

The minister requested that the committee undertake a targeted inquiry and report promptly, noting the extensive consultation already undertaken by the Territory Planning Authority and the strong support from both the community and industry. While the committee acknowledges this, the consultation undertaken by executive government is not equivalent to the committee scrutiny provided for in the Planning Act. Committee scrutiny is done by parliamentarians that are outside of cabinet, most of whom are outside of government. This does not perform the same role as work done by government to progress its own work.

Recent committee reports have found much to comment on regarding government work and government project management. It is disappointing that the government does not appear to understand the difference between the external scrutiny role undertaken by the committee and government community consultation and the need for external scrutiny in the current environment.

The draft major plan amendment before this committee is different from the one government consulted on. This is a good thing. Presumably, the government has responded to comments made by the community on the first draft. But that means there are elements in here that have received no community consultation. It is important that those who contributed to earlier consultations have the opportunity to comment on the revised draft and that the new elements are scrutinised.

The timing of this government referring this work to the committee presents challenges. It came immediately before two weeks of annual and financial reports hearings, after which follows the final sitting week of the year, then school holidays and the December-January holiday period. Rushing to hold hearings in December or January would risk excluding key stakeholders and community members. Canberrans do not take kindly to government consultations and scrutiny processes that are run in late December and early January. It is widely regarded as a means of stifling debate and

excluding those who are away or are busy with caring responsibilities over this period. In addition, this parliament works hard to be family friendly. We typically do not hold hearings during school holidays. This should only be eroded where absolutely essential.

The committee also notes that government has been running the missing middle reform project since 2017. In his foreword to the Housing Choices Discussion paper, then planning minister Mick Gentleman said:

People want different forms of housing in the suburbs, as well as in centres and mixed use areas. This includes town houses, terrace houses, secondary dwellings and apartments, as well as a continuing demand for detached homes.

In its 2018 response to the Housing Choices Collaboration Hub recommendation on housing flexibility, the government said:

EPSDD will explore options for changing the Territory Plan to increase the mix of dwelling sizes available in residential developments, as well as providing flexibility to deliver a range of housing types.

That was eight years ago. Proposed missing middle zoning changes were not presented to this committee for inquiry until late October 2025. It is a shame the government chose to refer it at this time of year and after eight years of work, but the timing of the government's referral is not a good reason to call for no scrutiny or for curtailed scrutiny.

The committee also notes the letter it received from the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, dated 18 November. The minister notes that if the committee does not report until April 2026, and allowing time for government to consider and action that report:

... it is reasonable to assume the major plan amendment would not be presented to the Legislative Assembly until the June 2026 sitting week. The Act also provides five sitting days after the major plan is presented for a notice of motion for a rejection motion to be given, which, even if the major amendment were presented on the first sitting of June, would carry-over to the September sitting.

The committee suggests that, if the government is concerned about delays to some really important reforms during the three-month gap in the sitting calendar, it could add an additional sitting week.

This committee will be diligent and will report as quickly as possible. This committee will make best efforts to report ahead of its statutory deadline. But the scale of this task and the timing of the referral from the government means we cannot reasonably hold hearings until February 2026 and we may not be able to report until April. We will work as efficiently as possible and we suggest the government does the same. Submissions for this inquiry close on 19 December 2025, and the committee intends to hold public hearings in February 2026.

MR STEEL(Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage and Minister for Transport) (11.46), by leave: I thank the Assembly's committee for their report on their inquiry into DPA-04, the

missing middle housing reforms. I have written to the inquiry twice, requesting that they undertake their inquiry into the missing middle housing reforms as soon as possible.

What we are talking about is the difference between weeks and a month, allowing us to implement these reforms potentially three months sooner. That is what we are talking about here. I wrote to them, when finding out that they had decided to undertake the inquiry in the maximum timeframe possible under the Planning Act—that being six months—for them to reconsider that. I have heard some level of reconsideration today that they might potentially inquire into the missing middle housing reforms and report earlier than 30 April 2026. But there is no guarantee. I would ask them to continue to reconsider this.

The government absolutely acknowledges the importance of Assembly oversight and inquiry and effective public participation in parliamentary scrutiny. We have not said that that the missing middle housing reforms should not be inquired into. We believe that the missing middle housing reforms are substantial changes and do deserve an inquiry, but that that inquiry should happen as soon as possible to allow more homes to be built in the territory sooner, to allow us to meet our housing targets and to make sure that people have the opportunity of shelter.

I draw the committee's attention to the effect the decision to report back by 30 April 2026 will have on delaying the implementation of these reforms and unlocking crucial housing supply and meeting the housing targets. When considering the time required for appropriate due diligence, the government needs to consider recommendations by the committee; the Territory Planning Authority needs to make any revisions to DPA-04 in response to those; and there needs to be time for me as the planning minister to reasonably consider the revised draft amendment in accordance with section 75 of the act.

By taking six months of the inquiry before those processes have occurred, it is reasonable to assume that the major plan amendment would not be presented to the Legislative Assembly until the June sitting week. The act provides five sitting days after the major plan amendment is presented for a notice of motion of a rejection to be given, which even if the major planned amendment was presented on the first sitting week of June would carry over to the September sitting. So we are talking about these reforms potentially being delayed now until September 2026. But there is an opportunity, if the committee reports some weeks earlier—we are talking about a number of weeks or a month earlier—for us to be able to not carry it over into that September sitting week and to be able to deal with this major reform around the middle of the year.

So that is what we are talking about. I think it is reasonable to shorten the length of some of the processes that the inquiry needs to undertake to enable that to happen, given the extensive consultation that has already occurred and given that many of the submissions, I understand, being made to the inquiry are saying that there should be either a shortened inquiry or no inquiry at all, given that that extensive work has already been undertaken.

I decided under the Planning Act not to use the powers that are available to me to determine a reporting date for the planning committee's inquiry. I did that in respect to

the committee, to enable them the flexibility to determine their own inquiry date and to take into account holidays in between. It is disappointing, therefore, that they chose the maximum period of six months. But I still think they have the opportunity to reconsider that in light of the comments made today and in the letters that I have written to them, but also in light of the submissions that have been made to them from members of the public and organisations who are commenting on the missing middle housing reforms.

It is really important to note that housing is a priority for our government and it is a priority for the community. Today we have seen CEDA release a report demonstrating that missing middle housing reforms will have a substantial benefit in supporting housing supply. If enabled in middle-ring suburbs in the five largest capital cities in Australia, they say that there would be a nine per cent increase in housing supply. Imagine what could happen here in the ACT if we delivered these reforms—and, if we do it sooner, it means that we can deliver those homes sooner for those who need them.

We have already heard from the community that many people are waiting for these reforms to go through to build more homes. So they are delaying the applications for building new homes in the territory until these reforms go through the Assembly. The longer it takes for these to go through the Assembly, the less homes will be built and the more delay that will be experienced by those builders and mum and dad investors who are wanting to build homes right now but currently cannot do that because these reforms are not in place.

We took these reforms to the election, which was in October last year, and we have been going about the work, which has been extensive, in developing DPA-04 and the draft Missing Middle Design Guide associated with it. That is what government does. We do all of the hard work. Now it is over to the committee to do an inquiry. I hope that that inquiry can be done in a way that is timely and considers that, if they do not report back in a reasonable period of time, it will mean that these reforms are delayed by several months, out to September 2026. What we are talking about is a couple of weeks or a month. If they can consider that, we would really appreciate it. Hopefully, they can report back to the Assembly that they intend to do an inquiry in a shorter timeframe.

MISS NUTTALL(Brindabella) (11.53), by leave: I was not intending to speak, but let's go. The Standing Committee on the Environment and Planning has rebuilt the existence of a tension between them and the planning minister. The comments made just now from Mr Steel highlight the minister's desire to complete the missing middle planning reform sooner than September and how this is in conflict with the committee's inquiry timeline, which is to report by the end of April. At the same time, the committee chair has just now quite reasonably observed that making the maximum use of available time is necessary for what could be the most substantial reform to our planning rules this decade.

The correspondence indicates that the minister needs two sitting weeks, rather than one, in order to progress his reforms, which he cannot reasonably locate after allowing enough time for the government's consideration of an April report. I do take slight umbrage at the minister saying that he has done the hard work and now it is over to the committee. I hope the minister is not insinuating that the committee do not also have a

hard job ahead of them of focusing on what could be some of the most substantial reforms to our planning rules this decade. I hope he may clear that up for us.

There is a possible solution that would accommodate both requirements. If the problem is a lack of sitting weeks, the Greens are happy to help schedule an extra sitting week, including during June. I would welcome approaches from members who would be similarly interested in this solution. If it would be supported, we can make it happen.

Justice and Community Safety Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 (No 3)

Ms Cheyne, pursuant to notice, presented the bill, its explanatory statement and a Human Rights Act compatibility statement.

Title read by Clerk.

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (11.56): I move:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

I am pleased to present the Justice and Community Safety Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 (No 3) to the Assembly. The bill makes amendments across 13 pieces of legislation to improve their operation. It is an omnibus bill, making minor and technical amendments to laws falling primarily within my portfolios. It also makes minor and technical amendments to laws within the portfolios of the Chief Minister and the Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services.

In short, the bill includes amendments that will improve the ACT's justice and community safety legislation to ensure that it is of the highest standard, facilitates the practical operation of justice sector agencies, and best supports and protects the ACT community. The amendments will have positive impacts in three primary wellbeing domains: governance in institutions; community safety; and identity and belonging. I will speak to each of these in turn.

Firstly, the bill will improve governance in institutions by amending the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 2008 and the Human Rights Commission Act 2005 to improve the handling of matters before ACAT and the Human Rights Commission. The ACAT Act amendments will ensure that ACAT can grant leave to inspect a document or other thing, to ensure that all items requested to be produced under subpoenas can be ordered, including documents and other objects that may be relevant.

The Human Rights Commission Act amendments will allow a person, with leave of the Human Rights Commission, to amend a complaint at any time. This will allow a person to add allegations to a complaint, rather than having to submit a new complaint where the subject matter is connected or the complaint is about the same entity. Enabling complaints to be amended and consolidated before they are referred to ACAT will help to streamline complaints.

The bill will amend the Legal Profession Act 2006 to provide more effective and appropriate remedies for unsatisfactory professional conduct of legal practitioners. The bill increases the maximum amount for fines able to be imposed by the relevant council, including the ACT Law Society, the ACT Bar Association and ACAT. This will better align fines in the ACT with other jurisdictions and ensure that they are commensurate with the behaviour being penalised.

I want to thank the Law Society in particular for their engagement on this issue, and recognise from the outset that the amount has not increased to exactly the amount that they would wish to see it increased to; but, given the increase being presented is significant, in and of itself, I look forward to the scrutiny of all members in this place about the appropriateness of it.

Amendments will also be made to the Official Visitor Act 2012 to clarify the eligibility requirements for the appointment of Official Visitors and their conflict of interest obligations, and to validate the appointment of an Official Visitor. Official Visitors are appointed to visit certain places where people are detained or where they are reliant on service providers.

Official visitors play an important role in ensuring that the rights and wellbeing of people in these places are upheld, including through addressing complaints. The bill will protect vulnerable people residing in visitable places by strengthening the requirements in the Official Visitors Scheme. For example, requiring Official Visitors to proactively report conflicts of interest will support the ability of the Official Visitors Board to monitor the independence of Official Visitors and ensure they are properly carrying out their functions.

The bill will also amend the Wills Act 1968 to facilitate the effective management of the centralised will register for the ACT under the Public Trustee and Guardian. This will allow for improved data security and records management, easier searching and a single source of truth.

I turn now to community safety. The bill that I have presented today will improve community safety by amending the Discrimination Act 1991 and the Criminal Code 2002 to expand protections against vilification and serious vilification so that people can live safely in the community. By expanding protections against unlawful vilification and serious vilification to the attribute of “sex” and capturing vilification based on “personal association” with a person with a relevant attribute, the amendments will strengthen these protections so that people in these cohorts are able to be protected from vilifying conduct.

The bill will amend the Discrimination Act 1991 and Crimes Act 1901, including consequential amendments to references to offences in the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act 2011 and the Crimes (Sentencing) Act 2005 to ensure that protections apply to all pregnant people.

The Major Events Act 2014 will be amended to clarify the application of offence and other provisions. These improvements will help to ensure safer management of major events.

The bill will also amend the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act 2011 to strengthen the protection of children in early education and care settings by enabling better information sharing between Access Canberra and the national body responsible for the national register of individuals subject to prohibition notices. This will help to protect children from people who have been deemed unsafe to work in this environment because they may pose an unacceptable risk of harm to children.

Finally, the bill will improve identity and belonging by amending the Domestic Relationships Act 1994 and the Legislation Act 2001 to make references to domestic partnership and civil partnerships more inclusive. Ensuring that the ACT statute book is inclusive of all people is of benefit to the whole ACT community, and I know that we still have some more work to do in that space.

In closing, while the amendments in the bill being introduced today are of a minor and technical nature, they will make noticeable improvements to the ACT's justice and community safety legislation. These amendments demonstrate the government's commitment to making continued improvements to our legislative framework and to addressing issues raised by the ACT community, and I commend it to the Assembly.

Debate (on motion by **Ms Castley**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Working With Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Amendment Bill 2025

Ms Orr, pursuant to notice, presented the bill, its explanatory statement and a Human Rights Act compatibility statement.

Title read by Clerk.

MS ORR(Yerrabi—Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services and Minister for Seniors and Veterans) (12.03): I move:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

I rise today to provide an update on the ACT government's efforts in progressing worker screening reform. Protecting the safety of vulnerable people is a priority for the Canberra community and this government. We are working closely with other jurisdictions and the Australian government to strengthen existing worker screening mechanisms. This is critical work that will ensure worker screening checks are operating effectively to protect children, people with disability and other vulnerable people in the ACT.

A working with children check is a safeguard to protect the health and safety of children and young people by assessing whether a person is suitable to engage in child related work. As these checks are issued under state and territory laws, the name of the check and its requirements and application processes vary across jurisdictions. In the ACT, our worker screening mechanism is the Working with Vulnerable People scheme, which operates under the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act 2011. This legislation enables worker screening checks for people seeking to work or

volunteer with children or with adults who are vulnerable due to disability, social or financial hardship or communication barriers. This means the ACT's scheme is more expansive than equivalent schemes in most other jurisdictions, where worker screening checks apply only to child related activities.

The ACT is contributing to work that will implement national mutual recognition of negative notices for working with children checks by the end of this year. This reflects a commitment agreed at the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General and is part of urgent efforts by states and territories to improve the safety of children and other vulnerable people, particularly in response to high-profile and shocking cases of abuse.

This government has progressed legislative amendments enabling the ACT to recognise a negative notice for a working with children check or equivalent from another jurisdiction. This reform—described as a “banned in one, banned in all” system—also enables the ACT to make worker screening units in other jurisdictions aware of negative notices as part of our standard operations.

The Working With Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Amendment Bill makes several changes to the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act. The bill adds new wording to specify that a person who has a working with children check declined or revoked in another jurisdiction is not eligible for working with vulnerable people registration to engage in a regulated activity involving children. The amendments clarify that these individuals are not eligible to hold an existing registration. In most cases, the exclusion will apply for five years, in line with the ACT's current approach for people who wish to re-apply after receiving a negative notice. The bill's amendments do not bar a person from any Working with Vulnerable People registration in the ACT; only from a registration that will allow them to work with children. The changes only apply where a person has received a permanent negative notice and not an interim bar in another jurisdiction.

The bill also adds a list of statutes to the “corresponding law” definition in the dictionary to the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act. This amendment makes clear which interstate laws the ACT will recognise.

Finally, the bill adds new wording in the regulation to the Working With Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Amendment Bill, requiring an applicant to disclose a negative notice issued in another jurisdiction. This amendment means an applicant will need to make a declaration confirming they have not received a negative notice elsewhere, nor had a registration revoked.

The “banned in one, banned in all” approach is a key priority for ongoing work to improve national consistency for working with children checks. The National Office for Child Safety is leading work to improve consistency across states and territories, which is critical to creating safer organisations. The ACT continues to work with our state and territory counterparts to address barriers to information sharing that may impede efforts to protect vulnerable people.

The Working with Vulnerable People scheme is just one of the ACT's safeguards to protect children and vulnerable adults. Another is the Reportable Conduct Scheme, which oversees how organisations prevent and respond to allegations of child abuse and

misconduct. Under the Reportable Conduct Scheme, certain employers who work with children are required to report to the ACT Ombudsman any allegations or convictions of child related misconduct by an employee. National work is underway to support the harmonisation of reportable conduct schemes across states and territories.

The ACT is also working to keep children and young people safer through the ACT Child Safe Standards Scheme. The scheme establishes 10 standards to promote and protect the rights, safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Amendments made in August 2024 to the Human Rights Commission Act 2005 make it mandatory for all organisations providing services for children and young people to begin implementing the Child Safe Standards.

Of course, there is still much we can do to strengthen the frameworks that protect vulnerable people in the ACT. Going forward, we have committed to a comprehensive review of the Working with Vulnerable People scheme to commence later this year. The review will aim to further improve the scheme's operation and ensure it is working in a way that promotes community trust. This work will encompass a sustainability and statutory review of the Working with Vulnerable People scheme and legislation, exploring how effectively the scheme supports safer outcomes for vulnerable people. The Working with Vulnerable People scheme has grown rapidly and is exceeding original projections since it was first reviewed in 2017, so the review will also consider how best to ensure a sustainable funding base for its future operation.

The review will aim to make clear what the ACT government can do to improve the Working with Vulnerable People scheme without additional expenditure, and this will ensure the scheme can continue to deliver improved outcomes for vulnerable Canberrans now and into the future. Reviewing the Working with Vulnerable People scheme will provide us with clear direction to ensure the legislation underpinning the scheme supports effective screening that promotes and upholds people's safety. It will also enable the ACT government to progress possible changes to legislation, training and education to strengthen the scheme's operation. In addition, the planned review will support this government's work to deliver child safety reform in the early childhood education and care sector, which is being led by education ministers from all states and territories.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority is the independent national body that helps state and territory governments to administer the National Quality Framework for children's education and care. The National Quality Framework provides a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality improvement. In the ACT, this applies to long day care, outside of school hours care, preschools and family day care services.

In addition to amendments to support mutual recognition of negative notices, the ACT has progressed a further change to the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act to strengthen information sharing in early childhood education and care settings. Upcoming work to review the Working with Vulnerable People scheme will intersect with reform already underway in this sector.

Our review of the Working with Vulnerable People scheme will also consider intersections with current work led by the Australian Department of Health, Disability

and Ageing to introduce aged-care worker screening. Going forward, the ACT's scheme will need to be responsive to this work to ensure it can support the proposed aged-care worker screening check for risk-assessed roles.

Worker screening reform has a key role in this government's efforts to protect children and vulnerable people. The amendments brought forward by the Working With Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Amendment Bill are critical to this reform. I am pleased to bring this important work to the Assembly's attention. It demonstrates the ACT government's strong commitment to protecting the safety of children and vulnerable adults in our community.

Debate (on motion by **Ms Castley**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Standing orders—suspension

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) agreed to, with the concurrence of an absolute majority:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Amendment Bill 2025 being called on and debated this sitting period.

Sitting suspended from 12.13 to 2.00 pm

Questions without notice

Health—General practice clinics

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Modelling has shown that if a doctor bulk-bills a standard level-B consultation in the ACT they would earn around \$8 per appointment after insurance costs, overheads and income tax. Minister, can I ask how does the government expect GP clinics to remain viable under these conditions?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question and congratulate him on his appointment, the first time I have had the opportunity publicly in this place to do that.

The Leader of the Opposition's question really speaks to the fact that, if he wants to be the shadow minister for health, which I understand is on the cards, he may need to get a better grasp of what is an ACT government responsibility and the viability of general practice and, in particular, as it relates to the Medicare Benefits Schedule. Reimbursement under that schedule is not a matter that is in the control, in any way, of the ACT government. We are, of course, working with the commonwealth and continue to advocate for sustainable primary care. One of the reasons that we have seen the significant pressure on the public health system is because of the primary care crisis that was created by an extended freeze of Medicare Benefits Schedule rebates under the previous coalition government, something that the Albanese Labor government has been addressing in multiple ways, including by tripling the bulk-billing incentive to encourage more general practitioners to bulk-bill—

Mr Parton: Point of order simply on relevance. The minister was asked how the government expects GP clinics to remain viable under these conditions and I am not

sure she is answering the question.

MR SPEAKER: Well, she has 30 seconds to go.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am on record repeatedly, Mr Speaker, acknowledging the challenge that is faced by GPs and primary care providers in the circumstances of the 10 years of neglect of the previous coalition government.

MR PARTON: Minister, what assessment has the government made of the impact of payroll tax settings on the sustainability of lower medical costs for GPs in the ACT?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Well, again, the Leader of the Opposition may want to look at some of the comments that were made around the changes to payroll tax for general practice that were announced by ACT Labor in the election campaign and then given effect through the 2025-26 budget. Those were welcome changes where any income that is generated from a bulk-billed appointment is not counted towards income for the purposes of payroll tax.

This is a balanced response that recognises that private practices are private businesses and some of them charge hefty fees and are very profitable private businesses. Some GPs make very good incomes. Other GPs who bulk-bill are really struggling to sustain that activity, and practices that bulk-bill are. This is why the Albanese Labor government's tripling of the bulk-billing incentive for all bulk-billed appointments and their additional 12.5 per cent practice incentive payment for practices that fully bulk-bill are so welcome. We have already seen at least an additional five practices that were not previously fully bulk-billing in the ACT move to full bulk-billing since those changes came into effect in November. I expect as practices and GPs work through the implementation of that we will see more moves towards bulk-billing, and, of course, all of the revenue that is generated from any of those bulk-billed appointments will be exempt from calculation under the payroll tax arrangements.

MR COCKS: Minister, did the government choose to keep its GP tax because it has run out of money?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I refer Mr Cocks to my previous answer. I think I have covered that off.

ACT Policing—Winchester police station

MS MORRIS: Congratulations to you, Mr Speaker.

My question is to the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services. The government has known that the City and Winchester police stations have been functionally obsolete and have not met the needs of ACT Policing since 2018. Minister, has the government delayed outlining plans for these facilities because of budget constraints?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question, and I congratulate Mr Hanson too. It is nice to see you up there.

As we have made clear to the Assembly and through the annual reports process, we have a process underway to understand. We had a request for expressions of interest from the market on a new City police station and Winchester police headquarters. We will continue to work through this process and recognise that it is a priority to see ACT police in new facilities.

MS MORRIS: Minister, when will you release a timeline and details for the new City and Winchester police stations.

DR PATERSON: As I said in my previous answer, we are working through a process at the moment, and we will continue to do so.

MR PARTON: Minister, how has the ACT's fiscal position impacted community safety and the ability of ACT police to do their jobs?

DR PATERSON: What we have seen from the ACT Labor government over the last three years has been a sustained investment in ACT police. We have seen investment and a commitment over the election to see 150 more ACT police officers. That has been committed through the budget. It is currently in process and will continue until 2029.

We have also seen significant investment in the last budget in the new enterprise agreement with our AFP officers, and this goes towards supporting the health and wellbeing of our officers. We are also seeing significant investment in our current ACT Policing facilities to ensure that they remain open and operational, as well as investment in our newer projects looking at options for a new City police station and headquarters as well as a Molonglo police station.

Schools—coloured sand—management and remediation

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Education, relating to the recent school closures due to asbestos contaminated sand. Parents from Ngunnawal Primary School have approached me with questions, given that their school was closed for an entire week. Minister, what was the decision-making criteria and process to determine which schools would be remediated and reopened first, and which ones would remain closed the longest?

MS BERRY: Thank you. I can say that I did provide a statement updating the Assembly on the work that occurred regarding the closures of schools as a result of asbestos contaminated sand, to ensure that our school staff and students were safe. I also said in that statement that getting our specialist schools opened was the priority, and I explained the reasons behind Malkara primary school needing to close for a second time because of increased contamination.

As the issue was identified, and the level of contamination was identified, the work was batched with the assessor so that the assessor could be working in parts of the ACT, to ensure that those schools could be reopened at a particular time. Having somebody working in a school in Tuggeranong then travelling over to Ngunnawal to do a school was not efficient. It might not have necessarily been that a school in Tuggeranong had more contamination than a school in Ngunnawal. It was about making sure the schools were batched in a way that we could efficiently open schools as quickly as we could.

Given the nature of the work and that there was a significant amount of work in going in to identify the contamination in the first place, and then having licenced assessors remove the sand, I acknowledge that it did take some time and there were some schools that were frustrated at the number of days that they were closed for. I have acknowledged that publicly every day since the ACT government made the decision to close the schools, based on our legislative requirements. But I acknowledge the confusion for some families and the disruption to their lives that that decision created for them. I also say that at the very front of our minds was making sure that our schools were safe for students and families. I acknowledge that some schools think that their school should have been reopened earlier, but it was a complicated process.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, why weren't those schools which faced lengthy waits for reopening provided with that information earlier in the week, to allow parents certainty to plan?

MS BERRY: It was a matter of information not being available to get out to families, because the level of contamination was often not known. So, it was not possible to provide information earlier, as I said.

Those investigations were happening over a number of days, which I explained publicly every single day throughout this process. Again, I acknowledge that not everybody would have seen that communication and that they would have been frustrated at the length of time that schools were closed. It was simply a complicated, complex process where the information was not known to be able to give to families in a more timely way. If I could have done that, I would have. The Education Directorate and others tried very hard to make sure that communication was going out families as soon as we had information.

It would have created more confusion and disruption if we had provided information that was incomplete, or if we needed to change that information, without knowing the incidences and circumstances within each and every school—which was dynamic.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, outer-suburb schools were hit the hardest by these closures. Is that a coincidence, or was there rationale from your directorate on this timing?

MS BERRY: We are still going through removing sand from schools. So, sand will still be in schools for days—perhaps even in years it will be discovered. It was a complicated, dynamic process. Each school had a different circumstance. I would strongly advise members and the Greens, that if they have people contacting them who want information to put them in touch with my office.

Mr Parton interjecting—

MS BERRY: Yes, but I can probably solve the problem them if they put them in touch with me.

Members interjecting—

MS BERRY: So, rather than waiting to have their questions answered in this place, they could come to my office and ask me for advice, and I could perhaps provide them with a more fulsome response. But I don't think it is appropriate, given that we are just out of a pretty significant health risk in our primary schools and high schools and colleges here in the ACT, as a result of a national incident—

Miss Nuttall: With apologies to interrupt, minister. On a point of relevance under 118AA: the question was if it was a coincidence that outer-suburb schools were hit the hardest. I did not hear that in the minister's answer. I am wondering if the minister has in fact answered that.

MR SPEAKER: We will give her 34 more seconds and see if she gets to the point before I make a decision on that.

MS BERRY: Well, no, I think it was probably likely just a coincidence. But I would also say that fearmongering or suggesting that some schools were left out because of where they are situated is not helpful in the context of this discussion.

Roads—Black Spots Program

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, on 23 September, you were asked whether the ACT government had submitted any requests for funding under the commonwealth government's Black Spots Program. The response that you gave on notice confirmed that the ACT government had not submitted any requests due to Roads ACT's crash database being unavailable for an extended period of time as a now completed system upgrade took place. Minister, what was the expected downtime versus the actual downtime of the Roads ACT's crash database being unavailable?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Ms Lee for the question. I believe it was unavailable because new data was being added into it. Going to the point of the question, which was the expected downtime versus the actual downtime, I will need to take that on notice and come back.

MS LEE: Minister, how much commonwealth revenue was forgone due to the ACT government's failure to apply for funding?

MS CHEYNE: I will try to answer that as best I can, because we seek commonwealth funding for a whole range of different projects, and not just through Black Spots funding. I will interpret the question—through you, Mr Speaker, perhaps you can tell me if I am wrong—as being that it is about how much we did not receive from the commonwealth by not applying through the Black Spots Program. I will need to compare that to previous years and see whether there is any great deficiency. I would note that we continue to receive an awful lot of funding from the commonwealth, including for our major infrastructure projects.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, how was this forgone revenue accounted for in this year's ACT budget?

MS CHEYNE: I will also take that on notice. I do not think it was. I will check this,

but I do not think that we would be hypothetically assuming some revenue would be received every year through the Black Spots Program. I will check and correct the record if I am wrong, and see if there is anything further that I can add. It is probably more reflective of funding that we expect to receive, and have some reasonable confirmation of that, as opposed to something that might be open for a particular application but not yet provisioned. I will double-check that.

Public schools—senior secondary language courses

MR EMERSON: Mr Speaker, congratulations on your new role. My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. The winding up of CIT Solutions has left the future of the ACT's external senior secondary languages offering in limbo. While year 11 students have been assured they can continue their studies through to year 12, year 10 students still do not have clarity on what will be available to them next year, in year 11. When did the ACT government first find out that CIT would no longer be delivering this program? And what has it done since to address this emergent gap in our public education system?

MS BERRY: I can only speak for the Education Directorate. The question with regard to CIT Solutions' decision would need to go to a different minister. I am not responsible for CIT. However, once the Education Directorate was made aware of the decision by CIT Solutions to discontinue their language program, Education has been working with CIT on ensuring that existing students would be able to continue their language program with CIT Solutions until CIT Solutions complete the wind-up. I understand that there is a motion before the Assembly to discuss this at a later time, Mr Speaker, so forgive me if I say anything wrong or pre-empt anything that is coming up later in the week. Bring it to my attention and I will stop.

Also, our ACT school system is meeting with and working with families to understand their needs as far as language education within our school system is concerned. The ACT government and the Education Directorate are not considering opening a centralised school system or taking on the responsibility of the process that was formerly operated by CIT Solutions. However, we are working with students to ensure that they can continue to study languages across the college system, either in their existing college or a college that offers a language that might be appropriate for them or by having home college and perhaps having a satellite school where they can continue that language program. But, regarding the decision of CIT Solutions, that is not a question I can answer.

MR EMERSON: Thank you, Minister. Why in December has the government still not made a clear announcement about its plans for language learning options for year 10 students moving into year 11 next year?

MS BERRY: I will double-check this, but I understand that CIT Solutions has provided information to existing year 11 students. For year 10 students, I have described the processes that the Education Directorate is working on with individual students and their families.

MS BARRY: Minister, why isn't the Education Directorate exploring how we can take over management of the external senior secondary school language program, given it

operates on a cost-recovery basis?

MS BERRY: Again, I understand that this is up for a debate at a later time in this sitting period. CIT Solutions offered a language program to both public and private school students as part of their ATAR studies. It is not for the Education Directorate to take responsibility of a private offering by CIT Solutions and open a centralised language school. What we are instead investigating and working with families on is to still offer a language program to public school students for free across our college system and offering languages that the students might wish to study. What Ms Barry is asking the Education Directorate to do is to fund a new school, basically, for education in both public schools and private schools, which is something that the ACT government cannot consider in this timeframe, but we can still offer language programs, and that is what we are working on.

Public schools—Strong Foundations program

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. In the Strong Foundations implementation plan phase 1 document, your message states that, as part of your “phased approach, the expert panel will undertake an annual independent review of implementation and report directly on progress to the government.” In particular, the progress on recommendation 5, which is about assessment and diagnostic tools, and recommendation 6, which is about individual and group support for students, is not clear. Minister, has the government received the expert panel’s review of implementation and will this review and the new learning and teaching policy be made public?

MS BERRY: Yes, the expert panel are currently doing the review process, and I have met with the chair of the expert panel to discuss the review that they have been undertaking. I do not yet have a document to provide for the public to understand, but I can take that question on advice. I am not sure when it will be available but, once it becomes available, I cannot see why it should not be made public. But I will take the question on notice on when it will be available.

MS CARRICK: Minister, has the government developed the new assessment strategy outlined in recommendation 5? Which assessments will be mandatory from 2026 in addition to the year 1 phonics tests?

MS BERRY: At this stage, it is only the year 1 phonics test. There is continued work happening with the implementation of Strong Foundations.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, has the government identified the multi-tiered systems of support models to test in 2026, as outlined in recommendation 6? How long will it take to implement those preferred models permanently?

MS BERRY: Work has been happening with the Education Directorate on those models and on their implementation, and we will be working towards phasing that implementation in 2026.

Climate change—ACT greenhouse gas emissions inventory report

MR RATTENBURY: My question is to the Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water on the timely delivery of reports. Minister, you have made a number of comments regarding the contents of the *ACT greenhouse gas emissions inventory report 2024-25*, noting the ACT will not meet its legislated emissions targets for 2025. Minister, on what date did you receive the report on greenhouse gas emissions and targets from the independent entity?

MS ORR: I received the finalised report for the 2024-25 greenhouse gas inventory at the end of November.

Mr Rattenbury: Sorry, the end of?

MR SPEAKER: The end of November the minister said.

MR RATTENBURY: Thank you Minister. On what date did you receive a report from the independent entity indicating the emissions target was not met, and I mean a specific date as opposed to a period of a month.

MS ORR: I am going to take the term “report” in its broadest terms and say advice, because data that informed the greenhouse gas inventory was finalised in October. The final report, as I said in my previous answer, was provided at the end of November. I believe it arrived in my office on 27 November, but I would have to double-check with the directorate when they sent that up, if that is the date Mr Rattenbury is after. What I would note is that while the final data and reporting was provided to the directorate and then to me through them in the timeframes required by the statutory processes, the City and Environment Directorate officials do engage regularly with the independent entity as part of preparing the greenhouse gas inventory. Throughout this process officials from the directorate have kept me briefed as to how the ACT was tracking with the available data and projections at the time.

MS CLAY: Minister, why is the government response to the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment’s report *Close to the edge* overdue, given that the EPSDD annual report states that it was due on 15 November this year?

MS ORR: The government’s response to the report is not overdue. The report was self-referred by the commissioner. That does not require—under the legislation, the statutory timeframe to respond—if the minister refers a matter to the commissioner for reporting then the government must respond within six months under the legislation. The reference that Ms Clay has made to the EPSDD annual report, following on from the most recent annual report hearings where this matter first came up—I have checked with the directorate and they have confirmed it is a mistake and they will be providing an amendment to the annual report in due course.

Economy—performance

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Welcome, Mr Speaker. My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, could you please provide an outline of the territory’s performance within the recent ABS State Accounts?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question. I am please to report to the

Assembly that the territory is now in its 33rd consecutive year of economic growth. The latest ABS data indicates that we are in fact the strongest growing state or territory economy. In the fiscal year 2024-25, the territory's gross state product grew by 3.5 per cent, which was the fastest rate of any state or territory and more than double the national growth rate of 1.4 per cent.

Pleasingly, we are also seeing gross state product per capita numbers that lead the nation—a growth rate of 2.1 per cent, which is three times faster than the next closet state, Tasmania, which had a GSP per capita growth rate of just 0.7 per cent.

This most recent data follows the 3.6 per cent growth result in 2023-24, meaning that the territory has gone back-to-back at the top of the table of economic performance around the states and territories. Equally important is the increase with experience in state final demand, which grew by 4.1 per cent in fiscal year 2024-25. It was principally driven by increases in public consumption, public investment and household consumption.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Chief Minister, what did the release tell us about our labour market?

MR BARR: Pleasingly, it told us that our growth in output has been matched by strong labour market outcomes. In October 2025, the territory recorded an employment-to-population ratio of around 69 per cent, and a participation rate above 72 per cent. Both these figures are significantly higher than the national averages of 64 per cent for employment-to-population ratio and 67 per cent for participation nationally.

At the same time, the territory's unemployment rate of about 4.3 per cent is broadly in line with the national rate. That means that we are combining high labour force engagement with relatively low unemployment.

We are also seeing robust growth in business numbers, from around 31½ thousand in the middle of 2021 to nearly 37,000 businesses operating in the territory in June 2025. That is an average annual increase of around 4.1 per cent. According to the ABS, that is the fastest in the nation.

These figures confirm that the ACT economy not only is growing faster than the rest of the country but is doing so on the back of a highly skilled and highly engaged workforce that is well placed to sustain our economic performance of 33 consecutive years of economic growth into the future.

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, will the government continue to drive growth in the territory's economy?

MR BARR: Yes, we will, and I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary question. have launched our economic development framework for the rest of this decade. It is built around four key priorities: knowledge-based economic growth; taking the economic opportunities associated with a net-zero-emissions future; investment in productivity-enhancing infrastructure; and continuing to enhance our world-leading city liveability.

Delivering precincts that integrate jobs, education and culture is central to our approach, supporting business and attracting investment in the industries that will shape our city's future. Through innovation and partnerships we seek to turn climate ideas into impact by creating jobs and industries for a net-zero economy—and to build on our city's great strengths, education and research. This sector has a strong focus on delivering city-shaping infrastructure that strengthens our visitor economy and creates connected and engaging spaces for the community.

ACT Revenue Office—fees

MR MILLIGAN: My question to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, this year the government increased parking fees by roughly six per cent; increased the cost to apply for, or renew, a licence by 10 per cent; increased vehicle registration by five per cent; and also removed the exemption of duties for electric vehicles. Minister, in real terms, what impact will this have on Canberrans?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Milligan for the question. I probably need some clarification about what he means by “real terms”. I am not trying to be cute here, but I just do not know how you are looking for me to answer this.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Milligan, care to clarify?

MR MILLIGAN: It is pretty much: what impact does the minister think that these price increases will have on Canberra families?

Mr Barr: Is that an expression of opinion, Mr Speaker, that is being sought?

MR SPEAKER: It is a fine line, isn't it, Chief Minister? I think we will move to a supplementary, Mr Milligan, and I remind you not to seek either hypotheticals or an expression of interest.

MR MILLIGAN: A new supplementary? Thank you for your generosity, Mr Speaker.

Minister, what was your role in these fee increases on Canberrans during a cost-of-living crisis?

MS CHEYNE: I would say it was as minister. So, all of these funding decisions go through an iterative process, through much consideration—and, I would say, consternation as well. We really were trying to make sure that our increases were proportionate to where there are other costs. As minister, of course, I take responsibility for any fees and charges that have increased within my portfolio.

I think Mr Milligan might be suggesting that we should put a pause on all of this. Looking at our fees and taxes and whatever it may be, the fact is that there are costs going up everywhere and it also remains true that a number of our fees and charges are inconsistent when compared with other states and territories—and, equally, that they have not been reviewed for some time. So, that is why you see some larger increases from time to time, but this is usually detailed extensively in the explanatory statement.

MS MORRIS: Minister, have you increased these fees because the government has run

out of money?

MS CHEYNE: No. Mr Speaker, I refer the member to my previous answer.

Asbestos—loose-fill remediation scheme

MS BARRY: My question is to the minister for the environment. Minister, the opposition has been engaging with constituents impacted by the Mr Fluffy disaster for a long time. Many of them have been deeply traumatised by the government's handling of the program and its subsequent effects. Minister, have you commenced genuine negotiations with all owners of the remaining Mr Fluffy properties to discuss revaluation of their properties and other outstanding matters?

MR STEEL: I will take the answer, as the remediation scheme is part of my responsibilities as Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development. The government continues to engage with the remaining Mr Fluffy owners that are on the register and provides them with information as needed on the options that they have to remediate the property themselves, if they wish to sell—and many of them do not wish to sell; they wish to remain in situ, and that is an option for them—or the options in the last resort scheme that are available as well. If they are unable to sell their property, the government can purchase it under the purchaser of last resort scheme.

We have been very clear as well to the remaining Mr Fluffy owners that we are not currently considering compulsory acquisition as an option, but that we would reconsider that in 2027, as the next point of review. We are not currently consulting them on the review, as was the particular subject of the question.

MS BARRY: Minister, what would you say about the fact that home owners involved in the compensation scheme incurred an average cost of \$300,000 to the government?

MR STEEL: Obviously, there have been costs potentially incurred by owners, but this was a very generous scheme. The original scheme that was put in place by the government many years ago stepped in at a time when there were not many options for the owners. In our view, it was a generous scheme. It provided them with a voluntary option to be able to opt in and have the government step in. Of course, some of those owners have made their own financial decision not to participate in the scheme, and we respect that decision.

MR CAIN: Minister, has the government avoided genuine negotiations with the remaining Mr Fluffy victims—that is certainly what we are hearing—because the government has run out of money?

MR STEEL: No.

Energy—waste-to-energy generation

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water. There is strong community opposition to waste-to-energy projects in the ACT and other jurisdictions. Consultation with Canberrans in 2018 to inform our current waste-to-energy policy showed that Canberrans support a ban on waste to

energy and think the ACT should be a world leader in waste management and recycling. Our current waste-to-energy policy bans waste incineration for energy production. This policy expires in 2025. Minister, does the ACT government plan on extending the current ban on waste-to-energy projects?

MS ORR: Noting the member's question and reference to the expiry date of the current policy, my understanding—noting that the portfolio came to me recently—is that the previous minister agreed that the policy would remain in place and would be held over. So it will continue to be in effect while we look at what revisions may or may not be required and go through our standard consultation processes. That is my understanding. My apologies to the previous minister if I have misquoted her. It remains in place. That is the important part.

MS CLAY: Minister, do you acknowledge the evidence around negative health impacts from waste-to-energy projects?

MS ORR: I can certainly acknowledge that there is a range of views on this topic and I will continue to look to my directorate and the wider ACT public service to advise me on the most up-to-date information as we move through all policy considerations in the future.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, when will you begin consultations with the community to inform revisions or any adjustments to the policy, which you referred to in your first answer?

MS ORR: There is no set timeframe. That is something that we will be considering once the MOG provisions have been finalised and we look at aligning other pieces of work, including national considerations, noting I came into this policy area just in the middle of the year.

Small business—payroll tax

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Treasurer. According to the Canberra Business Chamber's most recently published *Business Beat*, over half of businesses missed their targets in the previous quarter; less than a third of businesses—just 28 per cent—had a positive level of confidence; one-quarter expected to cut employee numbers; and 70 per cent of businesses reported that they expected their business to remain stable or shrink. At the same time, you were going to lower the threshold for payroll tax to include smaller businesses. Treasurer, how will increasing payroll tax help businesses that are already struggling to make a profit and retain staff?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. We have cut the rate of payroll tax for small businesses. Yes, we are broadening the base, but we have cut the rate. For small businesses with a payroll of up to \$4 million, it will be cheaper in terms of payroll tax paid in the ACT compared to New South Wales. Businesses in the ACT should have confidence, because our economy is growing faster than every other jurisdiction in the country at the moment. We have strong participation, and we are also seeing strong housing market outcomes in the latest data released today for the September quarter and residential dwelling data as well. Right across the economy, we are seeing really

strong signs.

The government will, of course, continue to engage with the Canberra Business Chamber and their members around the economic growth of the territory and informing future decisions that we make in the budget.

MS CASTLEY: Treasurer, given the challenges highlighted by the *Business Beat* and that just 28 per cent have a positive level of confidence, why would a business owner choose to remain in the ACT rather than move to another jurisdiction?

MR STEEL: As I have just said, it is cheaper for small businesses here in terms of payroll tax compared to New South Wales for a business with a payroll of \$4 million or less.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR STEEL: That is because we cut the rate of payroll tax. We will of course continue to make sure that we remain competitive with other jurisdictions.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR STEEL: As I made clear in my address to the Canberra Business Chamber after the budget, Canberra will remain a great place to do business. It is a great place to live. We are of course home of the federal government. The economy overall continues to grow. There are more businesses setting up here. The Chief Minister was very clear about that in the data that he was talking about today from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. We are seeing more businesses set up here, because it is a great place to do business. We are looking forward to continuing to support a strong economy and a strong business sector.

MR SPEAKER: I would just remind members—and the Chief Minister and Mr Parton—that, if you want to have a conversation, you can take it elsewhere.

Mr Barr: I have waited 18 years to have you tell me that, Mr Speaker!

MR SPEAKER: I was avidly listening to Mr Steel; it was a very interesting answer.

MR MILLIGAN: Yes; thank you, Mr Speaker. Treasurer, are you forcing businesses to cut costs and lose staff because you cannot manage your budget?

MR STEEL: No.

Government—investment

MR CAIN: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Treasurer. Despite the Chief Minister's attempt to put a positive spin on the economic data for the ACT, the national accounts reveal that public fixed capital formation, that is, public sector investment, fell 10.4 per cent in the quarter, driven by a 9.9 per cent drop in general government investment and a 16.7 per cent fall in public corporations investment. ACT government consumption also fell by 1.3 per cent. Treasurer, what has been cut to achieve such a large fall in

public investment?

MR STEEL: I reject the premise of the question. We have been very transparent in our budget about our continued investment in the ACT economy and across a wide variety of infrastructure and services. We continue to see very strong economic growth in the ACT. I know that the Liberals think it is their job to talk down the economy but with the highest GSP growth in Australia and very, very strong state final demand figures, overall our economy is growing strongly. We will continue, of course, to look at our other economic data but there are very positive signs right across the economy, whether it is the housing sector and the investment that is being made in it which has increased, by 2.3 per cent, the value of residential dwellings to \$197.4 billion to the September quarter, or whether it is the continued positive signs that we see in the participation rate in the labour market. Our economy continues to be strong and we will continue to invest in it and invest in the services that will support a growing economy.

MR CAIN: Treasurer, what has caused the fall in ACT government consumption?

MR STEEL: I am happy to take that on notice and provide some further detail if there is anything underlying the ABS figures. But, as I mentioned in my earlier answer, we are very transparent in our budget about what we are investing in and the measures and decisions that we have taken.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, is government investment and consumption drying up because you have run out of money?

MR STEEL: No, and I will also point members to the underlying information supporting the GSP figures, which the Chief Minister mentioned, is being driven by the government sector. Now that includes the commonwealth government as well as the ACT government but that economic growth has, in part, been driven by the public sector as well as other parts of the economy. So we are still seeing very strong support of the economy. That may shift between different parts of the economy from time-to-time, but at the moment, the public sector is one of the key three drivers that are supporting that very high GSP number of four per cent growth.

Business—payroll tax

MR PARTON: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Treasurer. This week you were asking the Legislative Assembly to enable changes to payroll tax that will increase the complexity and cost of compliance for businesses. This will add an extra tax on the jobs of some of Canberra's lowest-paid workers, including supermarket and fast-food employees. Treasurer, how will increasing taxes on Canberra's lowest-paid workers impact unemployment levels?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. I think he misunderstands the payroll tax system. Payroll tax is paid by the company employing people. It is based on the locally based staff but also takes into account their national payroll. These are companies that have been paying payroll tax for decades, in many cases. We do not think these changes will have a significant administrative burden in terms of the transition, including what we are asking the Assembly to support—that is, a half-year transition point from 1 July for a new tax bracket that is being, effectively, added to the

top end.

So, effectively, they will pay a changed number. That is what we are asking those very large businesses with a national payroll over \$150 million to pay—a changed number. The payroll tax system is relatively simple, and those businesses understand it well.

MR PARTON: Treasurer, have you modelled the likelihood that your payroll tax changes will encourage job cuts?

MR STEEL: I reject the premise of the question, in the sense that we do not expect that this will lead to job cuts. That is something that we will, of course, monitor very closely. What we are talking about is a one per cent increase compared to what they would have been paying in the year: a one per cent payroll tax increase.

Treasury has provided some feedback around whether that has impacted on their forecasts over the forward estimates. They say that it would be relatively small. That is because the additional amount of payroll tax that we are talking about is in the tens of millions of dollars in an economy that has, of course, billions of dollars. So it is a relatively small amount. For those businesses that are paying that extra rate, it is a one per cent increase on what they would have already been paying.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, have you chosen to implement payroll tax changes halfway through the financial year because you have run out of money?

MR STEEL: No. The reasons we have introduced the payroll tax changes in the way that we have are very clear and have been publicly discussed. Following the budget, we struck an agreement with the Greens to add this extra tax rate for the very large businesses with a national payroll over \$150 million, in order to make up for a reduction in the health levy from \$250 down to \$100 for residential ratepayers. So that will provide some revenue this year, but less than had originally been forecast for this financial year.

Richardson—shops

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Development. Minister, back in June I moved a motion asking the government to work with the Richardson shops owners to find a tenant or tenants that met the needs of the community, and report back by the last sitting of this year. The Richardson community is pretty keen to get an update so I thought I would have a crack now. Minister, what work have you done since my motion in June to work with the owners and find a tenant?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. I am sure she is not asking me to make an announcement in question time, so I will report, in accordance with the Assembly resolution, by the last day of the sitting in 2025.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, have you decided to release the blocks adjacent to Richardson shops? If so, when would you intend to release them?

MR STEEL: I refer the member to my answer to the last question.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, what is the next decision point from the government on the shops, and what is the timeline for this decision point?

MR STEEL: I thank the member, and I will refer him, again, to my previous—

Members interjecting—

Mr Rattenbury: A point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Braddock did not ask for an announcement from the minister. All these questions have been essentially, “What work have you done?” This is not a question of an announcement. It is a question of finding out whether the government has actually made any progress.

MR SPEAKER: Do you have anything further you can add, minister?

MR STEEL: I encourage the member to look at the statement that I will provide responding to the Assembly resolution, which I understand will be tabled on Thursday and will be quite comprehensive in relation to the matter. It will explain the processes that are underway currently in relation to that matter; what decisions have been made to date, and what processes are continuing.

Vocational education and training—National Skills Agreement

MS TOUGH: Mr Speaker, congratulations on your election to the role. My question is to the Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations. Minister, can you update the Assembly on the National Skills Agreement’s implementation plans and the generational investment in vocational education that they are delivering?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Tough for the question. I am pleased to report to the Assembly that the ACT has now signed implementation plans across all the National Skills Agreement’s priority reform areas. The National Skills Agreement represents a generational, \$64 million investment by the commonwealth and ACT governments in strengthening our VET sector. This is a wide-ranging investment, creating new opportunities for innovation through our TAFE centres of excellence and investing in deep work on improving research around VET learning and education.

Last Wednesday, I had the pleasure of hosting the federal Minister for Skills and Training, Andrew Giles, at CIT Bruce, where we announced a joint investment of \$14 million towards improving completion rates for VET qualifications in the ACT. This funding will provide grants for building wraparound supports for students, a careers hub to provide guidance on training and employment pathways through VET, and a completions research program to build an evidence base on how we can best ensure that learners complete their training.

I look forward to keeping the Assembly updated on the exciting times ahead for vocational education in the ACT.

MS TOUGH: Minister, what other priority areas are receiving funding and support under the National Skills Agreement’s implementation plans?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary. It is an excellent

question. As I mentioned, the National Skills Agreement is designed to support priority areas where we know our VET sector can be stronger. We know we need to be supporting our VET educators' needs for future learners, which is why we are investing \$3 million into the development of VET teachers. We also know we need good insights on what works, and we need to have the data insights and evidence to back it up, with \$5 million invested in improved VET data and evidence collection.

Most importantly, we know that to deliver the skills our future economy needs, we will need to collaborate. This is why the National TAFE Network is being established, with \$9 million invested towards it, ensuring that public providers work together closely to develop best practice teaching, innovative approaches to vocational education and ensure that their good ideas and best practice are rolled out nationally.

These reforms are designed to ensure that our VET sector is ready to support learners from the moment they enrol in a qualification right through to completion.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how long will it take to implement these reforms?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the supplementary question and his continued interest in the skills needs of our city. We know that, when it comes to improving our VET sector, it is a marathon, not a sprint. That is why the National Skills Agreement operates until 2028 and provides the certainty of long-term investment that our VET sector needs.

We know the improvements we are implementing are important, and we know we need to take the time to get it right. The previous federal coalition government did not take seriously the need to support our nation's VET sector and did not invest adequately in its success. The commonwealth, in close partnership with the ACT government, has already made significant investment to remedy this through fee-free TAFE, improving access to VET education to our community, and providing greater funding stability.

The National Skills Agreement builds on this and continues the deep work of uplifting our VET sector to ensure it is future-ready and focused on meeting the skills needs of our city.

Government—debt

MR COCKS: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, the territory's interest costs exceeded half a billion dollars last financial year. That is the first time that this threshold has been breached, and it is equivalent to 65 per cent of all general rates revenue. Treasurer, on what date did the total of the territory's cost of interest exceed the amount raised through residential rates?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. I am happy to take it on notice, but I point out that a comparison between the two is not necessarily taking into account the full revenue that we receive, both own source and from the commonwealth, noting that our largest source of revenue is, of course, from the GST. We continue to manage our budget in accordance with the fiscal priorities that we set out in the *Budget Outlook* and adjusted. We continue to look at opportunities to consolidate net debt. What that interest

represents in the budget is investments now in building hospitals, building schools and building transport projects to support the growth of our city, not delaying those projects into the future. They will benefit people now and for decades to come. They are important investments. We know that the opposition were opposed to them, but it is critical that we make those investments now. It also represents the investment that we made during the pandemic to support businesses and to support households through that very difficult time. That is what that interest represents.

The member's question does not provide the full context and seeks to cherry-pick and make false comparisons, and that does not necessarily add anything to the debate around the budget, which we know you opposed, including all the measures in it.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, what future rate burden will homeowners need to shoulder to fund your government's debt and interest bills?

MR STEEL: The level of net debt is set out in the budget. We have already borrowed against it and, of course, new borrowings will need to be made as well over time as we seek to invest in infrastructure and services that the community benefits from. The insinuation from the opposition is that they would not have built infrastructure projects like the hospital in Woden and they would not have built the upgrade to Garren Primary School, which the minister, Yvette Berry, and I visited last week—

Mr Cocks: A point of order, Mr Speaker: the Treasurer has moved to debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: I ask the minister to be directly relevant to the question.

MR STEEL: We support those investments, and those investments are required now to support extra capacity in our schools and extra capacity in our hospital systems, to support our community. That has meant that we have had to borrow for some of that, because they are needed now, but they will benefit people for generations to come. Yes, those generations will have to pay for part of the cost of delivering those services, but we will also benefit from the investment that our government has made in that infrastructure and in those services.

MS CASTLEY: Treasurer, why does the government insist on misleading ratepayers by not showing the amount of interest expenditure on rates notices?

Mr Steel: Mr Speaker, congratulations on becoming Speaker, by the way. I request your opinion on the question and whether it is in order, given it used a word that is unparliamentary. I would ask the former Leader of the Opposition to withdraw.

MR SPEAKER: I think the line referring to misleading the community is not an allegation that you have misled or that a member has misled in this place. I will get some advice from the Clerk so I do not make a mistake, but it is my view that it would be parliamentary in that it is with regard to the community as opposed to a member of this place.

I got a nod on that one, so we will allow it. I remind members that there will be no unparliamentary allegations of misleading in this place that would not happen without

a substantive motion. I do not think that has occurred, Mr Steel. Do you have anything further?

MR STEEL: What would be misleading, Mr Speaker—and this is in response to the question; I am not questioning your view on the validity of the question—is making false comparisons between one point of data in the budget and own-source revenue, and not understanding or presenting the full context of the budget.

Mr Barr: Mr Speaker, we have reached that happy point where I can say: all further questions can be placed on the notice paper.

MR SPEAKER: Thank goodness for that!

Public schools—senior secondary language courses—standing order 118AA

MR EMERSON: Mr Speaker, I seek your expert judgement and ruling under standing order 118AA on the education minister's responsiveness to my question and the two supplementary questions. The original question went to when the government first found out, not that CIT Solutions was being wound up but that it would no longer be delivering the specific program. I suspect that would be a matter for the education minister. We did not get a response as to why the government has not made an announcement about its plans for next year for year 10 students moving into year 11, and I do not think we got an answer either on why it is not exploring how it can take over management of the senior secondary language offering.

MR SPEAKER: I will exercise my expert judgement. I will look at that. We will review the *Hansard* and I will get back to members with a view on that.

Papers

Mr Speaker presented the following papers:

Bills, referred to Committees, pursuant to standing order 174—

Bills—Inquiry—

Liquor Amendment Bill 2025—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Legal Affairs, dated 1 December 2025.

Magistrate Court (Indicative Sentencing) Amendment Bill 2025—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Legal Affairs, dated 1 December 2025.

Bills—Not inquired into—

Assisted Reproductive Technology Amendment Bill 2025 (No 2)—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Social Policy, dated 4 November 2025.

Building and Construction Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 (No 2)—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation, dated 7 November 2025.

Government Procurement Amendment Bill 2025—Letter to the Speaker from

the Chair, Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration, dated 13 November 2025.

Tobacco and Other Smoking Products Amendment Bill 2025—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Social Policy, dated 4 November 2025.

Custodial Inspector Act, pursuant to section 30—Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services—Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2025, dated November 2025.

Standing order 99B—Petitions—Referral advice—Correspondence—Not inquired into—

e-Petition No 037-25—Working With Vulnerable People cards—Application fee—Objection—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Social Policy, dated 4 November 2025.

e-Petition No 051-25 and petition No 075-25—SDN Bluebell daycare—Relocation facilitation—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Social Policy, dated 4 November 2025.

Ms Cheyne, pursuant to standing order 211, presented the following papers:

Annual Reports (Government Agencies) Act, pursuant to section 13—Annual Report—2024-2025—Infrastructure Canberra—Corrigendum, undated.

Crimes (Child Sex Offender) Amendment Act, pursuant to section 4—Report—Statutory Review of the Crimes (Child Sex Offender) Amendment Act 2025, dated December 2025.

Election commitments—Production of progress report—Assembly resolution of 4 September 2025—Government response, dated December 2025.

Financial Management Act—

Pursuant to section 25—Consolidated Annual Financial Statements, including audit opinion—2024-25 financial year, dated October 2025.

Pursuant to section 26—Consolidated Financial Report for the financial quarter ending 30 September 2025.

Pursuant to subsection 30F(3)—Capital Works Program—Progress report—2024-26—Year-to-date performance as at 30 September 2025.

Integrity Commission Act, pursuant to section 206—Special report—Operation Luna (Part 2)—Canberra Institute of Technology—An investigation into the allegations of corrupt conduct by Canberra Institute of Technology public officials in connexion with the procurement of organisational change consultancy services—Ministerial response.

Planning Act, pursuant to section 75—Planning (Removing the FUA overlay and setting zoning for a number of sites including Bluetts block and Coombs peninsula) Major Plan Amendment 2025—Notifiable Instrument, dated November 2025.

Public Accounts and Administration—Standing Committee—Report 4—Inquiry into the Payroll Tax Amendment Bill 2025—Government response, dated 2 December 2025.

Subordinate legislation (including explanatory statements unless otherwise stated)

Legislation Act, pursuant to section 64—

Board of Senior Secondary Studies Act—Board of Senior Secondary Studies Appointment 2025 (No 5)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-284 (LR, 30 October 2025).

Children and Young People Act—

Children and Young People (Care and Protection Organisation) Standards 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-272 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Children and Young People (Therapeutic Support Panel) Appointment 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-291 (LR, 13 November 2025).

Civil Law (Sale of Residential Property) Act—Civil Law (Sale of Residential Property) Amendment Regulations 2025 (No 1)—Subordinate Law SL2025-22 (LR, 30 October 2025).

Drugs of Dependence Act—Drugs of Dependence (Independent Reviewer) Appointment 2025—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-292 (LR, 13 November 2025).

Heritage Act—Heritage (Council Member) Appointment 2025 (No 7)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-286 (LR, 10 November 2025).

Integrity Commission Act—Integrity Commission (Acting Commissioner) Appointment 2025 (No 2)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-283 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Legal Profession Act—Legal Profession (Solicitors) Conduct Rules 2025—Subordinate Law SL2025-24 (LR, 17 November 2025).

Lifetime Care and Support (Catastrophic Injuries) Act—

Lifetime Care and Support (Catastrophic Injuries) Dental Treatment Guidelines 2025—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-279 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Lifetime Care and Support (Catastrophic Injuries) Education Support Services Guidelines 2025—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-276 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Lifetime Care and Support (Catastrophic Injuries) Medical Treatment Including Pharmaceuticals Guidelines 2025—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-280 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Lifetime Care and Support (Catastrophic Injuries) Prostheses Guidelines 2025—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-278 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Lifetime Care and Support (Catastrophic Injuries) Respite Care Services Guidelines 2025—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-277 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Liquor Act—Liquor (Fees) Determination 2025 (No 2)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-285 (LR, 3 November 2025).

Ombudsman Act—Ombudsman Amendment Regulation 2025 (No 1)—Subordinate Law SL2025-21 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Road Transport (General) Act—

Road Transport (General) Application of Road Transport Legislation (Corroboree Group Oval Manuka) Declaration 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-281 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Road Transport (General) Application of Road Transport Legislation (Manuka Oval) Declaration 2025 (No 2)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-282 (LR, 23 October 2025).

Road Transport (General) Application of Road Transport Legislation (NBMS Rally Test Day) Declaration 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-293 (LR, 19 November 2025).

Road Transport (General) Act, Road Transport (Public Passenger Services) Act and Road Transport (Safety and Traffic Management) Act—Road Transport (Road Rules) Amendment Regulation 2025 (No 1)—Subordinate Law SL2025-23 (LR, 30 October 2025).

Urban Forest Act—Urban Forest (NBN Co) Determination 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-290 (LR, 13 November 2025).

Victims of Crime Act—

Victims of Crime (Victims Advisory Board) Appointment 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-287 (LR, 13 November 2025).

Victims of Crime (Victims Advisory Board) Appointment 2025 (No 2)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-288 (LR, 13 November 2025).

Victims of Crime (Victims Advisory Board) Appointment 2025 (No 3)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-289 (LR, 13 November 2025).

Standing orders—suspension

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) agreed to, with the concurrence of an absolute majority:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent the adjournment debate for this sitting week being extended to 45 minutes.

Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025

Debate resumed from 26 June 2025 on motion by **Mr Emerson**:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (3.06): The government supports the intent of Mr Emerson’s bill to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans and to close the gap. The government has also affirmed support for the Productivity Commission recommendations with respect to essential actions 3.5 and 4.3, and work is underway across the public service to address these recommendations. We support the principle of ensuring that responsibility for improving cultural capability is brought into public sector employment requirements. The government also recognises that simply amending laws will not achieve increased cultural capability, cultural safety and reporting accountability, and nor will it, of itself, eliminate institutional racism.

I thank contributors to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration inquiry into this bill in recent months, and this includes stakeholders both within and

outside of government. Witnesses courageously gave personal accounts in their evidence of the impact and the importance of work to implement Closing the Gap, and this also included commentary about cultural safety in the public service itself. It was quite rightly pointed out that the importance of work being undertaken by the Cultural Transformation Branch in providing cultural supports, such as the Cultural Load Matrix resource, needs to continue. It is important to acknowledge the significant and valuable work that is underway already to uplift cultural capability across the ACT public sector. With this, we seek to lead with education—training, engagement and foundational courses that will support staff across the public sector to learn and gain the knowledge that they need to translate these legislative principles into meaningful action and positive change.

We have space for truth-telling and listening, and we will make sure that there are foundational learning opportunities for each member of the Senior Executive Service to be supported on their cultural capability building journey. We will also provide relationship and connection opportunities for senior executive public servants to be more connected with the community. We seek to create a safe space for people to share their stories and to hear and learn from each other. That is ultimately the work that the Cultural Transformation Branch and their partners are doing to develop cultural capability and an assessment methodology. Part of this includes mechanisms that will support compliance, and that includes not only supportive frameworks but also the tools, resources and activities that will help senior executives to continually build and consolidate their cultural capability.

In the next section of the debate, the government will move amendments in the detail stage to improve its operation. I will speak more extensively to those in the detail stage, but for now we indicate our support for this bill. We thank Mr Emerson for bringing it forward and for the collaboration between the government and his office in finalising a set of amendments that will achieve the intent of the bill. I commend the bill to the Assembly in this in-principle stage. And, as I have said, I foreshadow that I will move a batch of government amendments in the detail stage that will follow the in-principle debate.

I commend the bill to the Assembly.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (3.10): Nobody could argue against the intent of this bill. I applaud Mr Emerson for bringing it forward, and I applaud all stakeholders who have participated in getting it to this point. I also applaud those who have worked on the amendments that we are about to debate. We, the Canberra Liberals, certainly acknowledge the national recommendations from the Productivity Commission. We also acknowledge the legislative change that has already been made in Queensland.

Given the level of government amendments to this bill, it is clear that the government had concerns about the many potential unintended consequences of the bill in its original form. I think that those concerns are valid. As a descendant of the Noongar people of WA and the only member of this chamber with Aboriginal heritage, it is extremely important to me that we get this absolutely right, and I am not sure that it is absolutely right now. I understand that Mr Emerson and the other parties have arrived at a consensus on this bill in its amended form. We will not be seeking to upset that

apple cart, but we will certainly be watching the rollout of this with much interest. I certainly hope that my fears of a series of unintended consequences do not roll out as a consequence of this bill.

I do not want my comments to detract from what is a very special day for a lot of people. A lot of work has gone into getting this bill to the point that it is now, and we, the Canberra Liberals, will certainly not be standing in the way of that.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (3.12): This bill meaningfully embeds Closing the Gap objectives into the ACT public service, ensures transparent reporting of the public service's progress or otherwise in closing the gap, and strengthens the safeguards for genuine transparent consultation with First Nations people. The Greens support this bill wholeheartedly and see it as a crucial step in the right direction and one that must be taken without delay. First Nations people cannot be made to wait forever.

The ACT is a largely progressive jurisdiction, being the first in the country to establish a democratically elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to government and the only jurisdiction where a clear majority supported the Yes campaign, with more than two-thirds of ACT voters backing it in. However, this sentiment means little without tangible action to support it. Despite these seemingly progressive credentials, the ACT has the highest rate of Indigenous incarceration in the nation. First Nations people make up around a quarter of our prison population and are enormously over-represented within the justice system. This is a stark indicator of entrenched, institutionally embedded discrimination. It underscores how much work remains on the path to real reconciliation.

Another example is the recent Disaster Preparedness Scorecard: Closing the Gap in Emergency Management by National Indigenous Disaster Resilience in Monash University. This scorecard rated the ACT as poor across the board in elements such as: "Are emergency management agencies prepared to work with Indigenous peoples?" "Are Indigenous organisations being funded to prepare for the next disaster?" and "Is disaster planning and decision-making being shared with Indigenous peoples?" These are just two examples. I could list many more across the diverse range of government responsibilities. That is why a bill like this, aimed at tangibly embedding the Closing the Gap objectives within the ACT public service, must be supported.

By consolidating the role of the ACT's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, this bill ensures that genuine listening is prioritised and that consultation with First Nations elders and representatives is genuine and robust. Strengthening these processes directly improves accountability, transparency and the delivery of social and economic outcomes for First Nations communities, reinforcing the government's responsibility to meet its Closing the Gap commitments. The Greens strongly support the intent and the ethos underpinning this legislation and its commitment to truth-telling, accountability and confronting institutionally embedded racism.

Furthermore, we support the two central actions: holding the public service responsible to contributing to Closing the Gap commitments and requiring the government to report on how it is meeting those objectives. The support of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body affirms that this bill deserves the Assembly's endorsement. The Greens support this bill as an essential and long-awaited step forward towards

reconciliation. I will make further remarks as we move to the amendments stage.

I thank Mr Emerson for bringing forward this bill for debate here today. I also thank the many people who have engaged in this process, whether it be in correspondence with my office and those of the fellow Greens members and other parliamentarians here, those who contributed submissions and provided evidence at the public hearings at the committee inquiry or those who join us today in the gallery. Thank you for being part of this process to pass this landmark piece of legislation today. It is important that First Nations voices are heard and effectively represented in today's debate.

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (3.16): I too rise to speak in support of this bill, and I do so in my capacity as the shadow minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

This bill seeks to legislate Labor's own commitments under the National Closing the Gap Agreement for our First Nations communities. This bill reflects the recommendations of the Productivity Commission's 2024 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

I must say that it is quite unusual and, some might say, somewhat bizarre that an Independent is bringing forward legislation to force the government to deliver on its own commitments. But we know that Labor is a party that is big on promises but fails very woefully on delivery. Sadly, Labor's failure to give effect to this commitment is symptomatic of its long line of failures to implement programs effectively. There is a long list of outstanding commitments relating to the Closing the Gap agenda, the outcomes of the Disability Royal Commission, and recommendations arising from the National Preventive Mechanism. Labor loves to agree, but simply does not do the work to deliver in a timely manner, because there are no consequences for not delivering.

Some may ask: where does the Closing the Gap agenda sit in the Liberal Party's priorities? I say this: as reflected in our Liberal values and our "we believe" statement, we believe in social justice; we believe in encouraging the strong and protecting the weak; we believe in widening opportunities for education; we believe in the preservation of families, in good homes owned by those who live in them. Closing the Gap is not about creating a special status for First Nations communities; it is about addressing real gaps in health, education, justice, child development, life expectancy, and employment opportunities.

Disturbingly, the outcomes for Canberra's First Nations communities in some of these categories are among the worst in Australia. It is about fairness and equity. It is about ensuring that disadvantaged communities are given the same opportunities as other Canberrans—opportunities that Canberrans expect. In the ACT it is about addressing the systemic racism that is becoming a blight on our public institutions. In the famous words of Martin Luther King, "It is a cruel jest to expect a man to lift himself by his bootstraps if he's got no boots at all."

Turning to the bill, there are two key elements. Firstly, it seeks to force the government to ensure transparency of its commitments and actions by requiring certain details to be included in directorates' annual reports. Secondly, it seeks to impose an obligation on public servants to ensure that those commitments are given effect.

In relation to the annual reporting obligation, the changes in the bill are minor but significant for First Nations communities. They provide a mechanism to seek the views of those communities through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. That process mirrors the current process of seeking recommendations from the relevant Legislative Assembly committee in that there is a defined period of 30 days for comments.

The Canberra Liberals are on board with genuine consultation and want to ensure that the community input is reflected in the minister's annual report direction. This direction is by a disallowable instrument, meaning that it will be reviewed by the Assembly, providing an added layer of accountability.

In relation to the insertion of a Closing the Gap principle into the Public Sector Management Act 1994, I must say that I was initially concerned about the potential for conflict within the public service of the original broad application of this principle to all public servants. Clearly, the implementation, funding and evaluation of public policy matters like the Closing the Gap policy is the responsibility of senior management. It would be very unfair to hold public servants to account for a failure of their own senior management to implement commitments appropriately. However, I am pleased to see the amendments to just focus on the obligations of the senior executive service.

Of course, the Canberra Liberals support the intent of this bill. Also, as the Leader of the Opposition has mentioned, we are sceptical about the outcomes that it will provide to First Nations communities. But, if anything, it will force the government to be transparent on and accountable for its own actions and the decisions it makes.

Labor will no doubt say in its response that it is focused on the final Jumbunna report. The Jumbunna report is the new kid on the block, and we will hear about it many times in this chamber. We have heard these stories before from Labor. There is nothing in the Jumbunna report that we did not already know.

Labor have had a quarter of a century of continuing power in the ACT. The failure to deliver their commitments, their failure to close the gap, is all on their watch. We will expect Labor to make more big announcements, because that is their record, but their delivery, again, as I have mentioned, is woeful. I have considerable doubts that this bill will make any significant difference, but I am hopeful. I am hopeful that this is the beginning of turning a new page, because there are lives that depend on us in this chamber getting it right.

Once again, I thank Mr Emerson for bringing this bill forward. I thank the community members who have constantly tried to advocate for basic things that you would expect that a government would offer its citizens. I thank you all for your contributions and for all you have done for your community and for Canberra. I commend the bill to the Assembly and thank Mr Emerson again.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (3.23): I am privileged to rise today on Ngunnawal country to speak to Mr Emerson's bill and the government amendments. This has been a collaborative effort, and I am pleased that we have arrived

at a position where there is support across the Assembly for this important reform.

I am somewhat infamously on record as saying that sometimes things can get done more quickly through a private member's bill than if the government develops legislation through its own internal processes of consultation, internal and external. However, this process of private members' bills does require a willingness on the part of the member introducing the bill to take on board feedback through the Assembly process. This is the legitimate role of Assembly committees. It is also part of the government's responsibility to ensure private members' legislation is workable in practice.

I want to thank Mr Emerson and the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members who have engaged in this process. I recognise that it is extremely frustrating for those community members to make the same points again and again, and that the committee process itself was not a welcome one. But the outcome will be, I hope, unanimous support for a bill that embeds an expectation of cultural safety and competence across the ACT public service and that requires transparency about how each agency is addressing the Closing the Gap priority reforms.

I want at this point to acknowledge the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and leaders who are joining us in the chamber today, and to thank them more broadly for their contribution to the wellbeing of First Nations people in the ACT and to our community as a whole.

The ACT government is, of course, a proud signatory to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. I was there when Mr Barr signed the national agreement with Katrina Fanning, the then Chair of the Elected Body. Mr Emerson's bill seeks to give effect to essential actions 3.5 and 4.3 of the Productivity Commission's 2024 review of the national agreement. The government agreed with those recommendations when they were handed down and, from the outset, has agreed with the intent of Mr Emerson's bill.

Indeed, the government had intended on giving effect to its commitment through future amendment to the Public Sector Management Act. In addition, this year's annual report directions explicitly required all directorates to include information about their progress under the national agreement and the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement. However, as I said, we have welcomed the opportunity to work with Mr Emerson on this bill.

The government amendments to Mr Emerson's bill respond to the committee inquiry into the bill, the expert advice of our public service and consultation with Mr Emerson and the Elected Body. While all parties have made some minor compromises to reach this point, the result is something that we can all be proud of. The Chief Minister will speak to the amendments in detail in the detail stage, but I will briefly outline why we have put them forward.

On the annual reports element, which sits in my portfolio responsibilities, the bill would require annual reports to include information about measures taken to implement the priority reforms under the national agreement and to respond to any review of progress under the agreement. As I have noted, this type of reporting is already reflected in annual reports, maybe in a more limited way. However, we accept the premise of

Mr Emerson's bill that this reporting could be strengthened by ensuring its form is agreed with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

We are also mindful of the broader purpose of annual reports, and it cannot be the case that failure to agree on the exact form of Closing the Gap reporting could derail timely provision of annual reports. The government amendments have sought to strike a balance that will allow us to work with the Elected Body on developing the annual report directions and providing transparency to the Assembly about this process.

As members may be aware, the minister is already required to provide the annual report directions to the relevant Assembly committee and give the committee 30 days to provide comment or feedback to the minister prior to the directions being finalised. With the proposed government amendments, this bill will require the minister first to consult with the Elected Body and to consider and formally respond to any recommendations it makes prior to submitting the draft directions to the Assembly committee.

To ensure transparency, the minister will be required to provide any Elected Body recommendations and the minister's response to those to the committee to inform its consideration. I thank the Elected Body and Mr Emerson for their support of this practical approach, which reflects the Labor government's ongoing commitment to supporting the Elected Body as the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to government.

In this vein, I note that the Elected Body is also the representative on the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Bodies that partners with commonwealth, state and territory leaders—and the Local Government Association, which always gets forgotten—and ministers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs through joint council.

I am pleased that we are joined in the chamber today by the current Elected Body Chair and joint council representative, Maurice Walker, as well as current and former Elected Body members, including Paula, who previously represented on the joint council as well, and apologies if I have missed others who have been members of joint council.

The Elected Body already works closely with government on reporting against the priority reforms and targets under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement, with reports tabled in this place annually.

One of our objectives has been to ensure that this reporting is streamlined so that our officials, especially those who are focused through the year on building the cultural capability of the ACT public sector and delivering on the Closing the Gap reforms, do not spend inordinate amounts of their time reporting on the same thing in multiple ways. As the community repeatedly tells us, action is what matters. Words on paper and in this place are important for accountability, but they cannot be the overriding focus of our effort.

Very importantly, this bill, including the amendments that I understand are universally supported, delivers a nation-leading mechanism to ensure senior executives in the ACT

public service are obliged to do their jobs in accordance with a new Closing the Gap principle. This means there will be no doubt that it is every senior executive's job to continually develop and demonstrate cultural capability and to work in line with their role to deliver the provisions of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The Productivity Commission report recommends that jurisdictions look to the Queensland model for instructive examples of acquitting obligations under essential action 3.5. The Queensland approach included amendments to their Public Sector Act, centred on the concept of reframing the state's relationship with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Queensland legislation outlines the responsibility of public sector entities to fulfil their roles in delivering this reframed relationship.

Importantly, the Queensland legislation places responsibility for ensuring an entity fulfils this role specifically on the chief executive of that entity. In the ACT context, the same approach would restrict accountability to the director-general of a directorate.

We have collaborated with Mr Emerson on what, if passed, will be a piece of legislation that goes further than the Queensland model and will be nation leading. This bill, as amended by the government amendments, will apply to all senior executive service members of the ACT public service and places more specific obligations on them than the Queensland model, in developing and demonstrating cultural capability and the delivery of the national agreement.

It is therefore incumbent upon the government to ensure we are appropriately supporting our senior executive service members to deliver against these obligations. That is why the government amendments propose a delayed commencement of the bill, to ensure that we can get the implementation right and protect the interests of both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and our committed public servants.

There is good work underway in the ACT public service, as the Chief Minister has spoken to. This work is aimed at improving the cultural capability of our staff and giving them the tools they need to best serve the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. This includes the work of the Cultural Transformation Branch in the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, which was established in August 2023 to achieve high-impact results that transform the ACT public service workplace culture, where the principles of cultural safety, inclusion and belonging are upheld in the way ACT public servants behave and the decisions they make every day.

The Cultural Transformation Branch currently comprises two teams—the ACTPS Inclusion and Belonging Team and, as of April 2024, a dedicated Culture and Pathways Team, comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. The team has been working to deliver the development of cultural safety care plans, a pilot program for directorates to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, development of an SES cultural capability program; development of the cultural integrity framework, and development of systemic racism guidelines.

This work has already laid the foundation for the implementation of this bill. I would like specifically to call out Natalee George's leadership of the Cultural Transformation Branch, and her support for her Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues across the ACT public service.

I would also like to note the other public servants who worked on the government amendments to this bill, often under strict time pressure as this week approached, to enable us to debate the bill before the end of the year. This includes Chantel Potter, Cate Allingham, Carolyn O'Neill, Julia Burns and Annika Hutchins. I would also like to thank Timothy Clulow from the Parliamentary Counsel's Office, who I understand worked closely with the team and Mr Emerson to get us to this point.

Institutional racism is part of the legacy of colonisation. It takes more than good will to eradicate it. It requires an ongoing examination, and re-examination, of the way we work and the structures, expectations and cultural norms that influence how government agencies and others make policy and deliver services. This bill is the next step of this journey, and it is one we are proud to take.

It will not close the gap overnight, but it is a strong signal of our commitment to continue working with all those in the chamber today, in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and the community more broadly, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the answers, and we must continue to listen deeply, but then to act.

I commend the bill and the government amendments to the Assembly.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (3.34): I rise today to speak in strong support of the Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. This bill represents a turning point for the ACT, a chance to move beyond words and deliver real, systemic change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our community.

The reforms contained in this bill are not radical; they are practical, achievable and aligned with the commitments that the ACT government have already made. They ensure that responsibility for Closing the Gap does not rest solely on the shoulders of First Nations communities but is shared by those with the power to drive systemic change—senior leaders in our public service.

This bill is about accountability. It is about embedding cultural capability and safety into the DNA of our government. It is about ensuring that, when we say we will close the gap, we mean it, and we act on it.

One of the major components of the bill is around reporting. The original bill included information to be included in the annual report. It was to be agreed by the minister and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. I note that Labor's amendment has removed this requirement for the Elected Body to agree to what is to be reported in the annual report. The amendment requires the Elected Body to make a recommendation to the minister. The minister must consult with and give the Elected Body a copy of the proposed reporting in the annual report direction. The minister must consider any further recommendations from the Elected Body.

While the Elected Body is no longer required to agree to the content of reporting in the annual reports, I respect the process of negotiation to get the Assembly to agree to this bill.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate on this important bill. I congratulate Mr Emerson on bringing forward this legislation, which takes a decisive step towards eliminating structural racism.

DR PATERSON (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Women, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, Minister for Corrections and Minister for Gaming Reform) (3.36): I rise to speak in support of Mr Emerson's bill today and thank him for bringing it to the Assembly. I would like to thank the ACT Elected Body members who are here today for their continuous work with the government. I would also like to thank and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders, and community members who are here today or listening online, in support of these changes.

Reporting against the Closing the Gap agreement has repeatedly shown that unacceptable disparities in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the wider community continue to persist. I am conscious of this every day. I see it reflected in my portfolios, in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people detained in the AMC, in the rates of violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, and in the distrust of our institutions.

I would like to acknowledge that these last couple of weeks have been particularly challenging and confronting for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the Canberra community as a whole. I am committed to listening to and working with the community to repair the relationship between the community and the police.

I also acknowledge the feedback from the community, through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, that the Chief Police Officer and I were given this week. We will keep showing up to understand the issues and continue to work with the community to address these.

I acknowledge that, behind every statistic that we speak about in this chamber, there is an individual and a family—a story of hardship, of intergenerational trauma, a story shaped by the long shadow of colonisation, dispossession and, ultimately, a demonstration that our institutions on many occasions have failed our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, here in Canberra and across Australia.

Despite these sobering realities, we must not lose sight of a vision for a different future. The ACT government will continue to strive to ensure that every member of our community is supported to live in a safe, connected and fulfilling community. We will continue to work closely with the Elected Body to build stronger relationships, to listen, to learn and to be guided by the community.

It is essential that this work continues in genuine partnership. Together, we must respond to the Jumbunna report, initiate a board of inquiry into deaths in custody, and implement the forthcoming Our Ways—Strong Ways—Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan.

I want to acknowledge the load that this work places on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly elders and community leaders, many of whom are in the chamber today. Governments over many years have asked you to show up, to work with

us, and to share your cultural knowledge and leadership. I acknowledge that you have done that, time and time again. Your ongoing persistence, advocacy and strength, in continuing to show up, in continuing to sit at the table, is something that I am deeply grateful for. Only through working side by side can we make meaningful progress for future generations. Only through listening deeply to the voices and experiences of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can we find solutions and change trajectories.

As we debate this bill today, we must acknowledge that Closing the Gap cannot be done through legislation alone. Laws can compel action, but they cannot replace or create the trust and relationships that are required to do this. They cannot substitute for healing, and they cannot rewrite the past, but they can help to shape the future.

Closing the Gap is about justice. It is about ensuring that all children in our community grow up equally safe, equally supported and equally hopeful. It is about ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our community have the freedom to live a self-determined future, with culture and identity strong for future generations, and for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to have confidence in the systems that are meant to serve them. We must work to ensure that truth-telling is not confined to ceremonies, anniversaries or moments in time in the Assembly, but is embedded in how we govern. We must listen, learn and earn the trust of a partnership going forward.

This bill affirms our commitment to that partnership. I am pleased to support the passage of this bill, as amended.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (3.41): I am pleased to rise today in support of the Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. Whilst Mr Braddock has led the work on this bill for the Greens and has spoken already, I wanted to add my voice to make very clear our support for this legislation and to thank Mr Emerson for bringing it forward.

This is an important bill that we believe can make a practical difference once it has been passed in this place. The bill strengthens accountability, transparency and effectiveness in delivering social and economic outcomes for our First Nations communities here in the ACT. It clarifies and consolidates the role of the Elected Body, ensuring that consultations with First Nations Elders and representatives are rigorous and genuine. In doing so, the bill strengthens the government's responsibility to uphold its commitments to Closing the Gap. Consultation with the Human Rights Commission and the Elected Body's support for these amendments reinforce our view that this bill deserves the support of the Assembly.

While the bill seeks to legislate the ACT government's obligations under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, it particularly reflects the commitment under Priority Reform 3 of the national agreement to systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability and respond to the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in our city. That is the formal part of it.

I think it is also very much about the human consequence and the human side of this legislation. I reflected on the fact that there was a significant submission made by

16 First Nations community members—it was a joint submission—into the inquiry process. I pick up a point made earlier. I know there was frustration about the inquiry process. But, nonetheless, this submission made a very important point. In the submission, the authors noted:

Multiple reviews have made recommendations that this Bill will give effect to, which is why we fully support its passage by the Assembly.

That is the reason the Greens support it too. We support this bill because of exactly the point articulated in that submission from the elders, leaders and organisations—that is, that we know what needs to be done; we simply need to get on and do it. I understand that frustration, because, clearly, there is a need for tangible action. When one looks at any of the points of data, the measures and the indicators that examine the quality of life, the progress and the equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans, we see lower outcomes than for other members of the community. Whether it is justice, health, education, employment or home ownership, there are a range of indicators which show that we have a lot of work to do in our community to truly create equity and, to use the language, to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

We believe this bill can make a practical difference in assisting with that by creating a focus in the public service by providing points of transparency and accountability. While it is not the silver bullet that will fix those gaps, we believe it plays a practical and valuable role in doing so. I thank Mr Emerson and those who supported him in putting this bill together, and we are pleased to support it today.

MS ORR (Yerrabi—Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services and Minister for Seniors and Veterans) (3.45): I would like to acknowledge all the members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community present in the chamber today. As most members in this debate—I think all members in this debate—have indicated, there will be support for Mr Emerson’s amendments, during this debate and so I will not make my comments specifically to those.

I would like to make the reflection that I have had the privilege over my first year in the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander portfolio to meet with a wide range of people in the community, and it has been evident that they are concerned that the pace of change and action in closing the gap is too slow. I have also had the opportunity to appreciate the complexity of the factors that are involved in closing the gap across all aspects of our community and government.

Coming into the portfolio and given where we find ourselves on this journey and with the support of my colleagues in the government, we have looked to new ways that we can drive and coordinate action. To this end, we have stood up the Closing the Gap Subcommittee of cabinet, with all ministers being members of the subcommittee and the Elected Body chair and deputy chair being standing invites, with other members being invited at their discretion when their topics of areas are the focus of discussion. This is the first time in our country that the independent voice to any government has sat at the same table as the government to discuss and inform the decisions being made

about them.

I would particularly like to acknowledge and thank the Elected Body for their work on this, as partner with government in this work, and the goodwill with which they have embraced this new approach. I think it is fair to say that, after our first meeting, most people are talking about the opportunities and the possibilities that can be achieved by joining up this conversation and the opportunity for a deeper understanding of the perspectives at the table. This will be critically important as we work through what will be quite a large amount of work, including responding to the range of reports that are already out there and the commitments that have already been made.

Later in this sitting, I will also be tabling the Elected Body's hearing report and the phase 3 action plan from the Elected Body, both of which will be important to further informing how government and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community can deepen our understanding of each other's perspectives and strengthen our approach to closing the gap.

I think it has been raised by a few people today, but one of those key critical areas as we work to drive that systemic change that we are all looking for is the government transformation project of Priority 3 of the Closing the Gap report. This particular amendment will certainly help to inform the accountability and how we get there. But it has been reflected by a few people today that it is not just about the individual actions; it is also about getting that deeper understanding—not just having truth-telling, but listening and hearing and bringing that in to change the way governments and their institutions, and the people who work for them across all areas of it, actually approach the work that they do. It is a big shift. It is an important shift. It is not for one individual; it is for everyone. It is for government to lead the way in making sure that we approach that, but informed by community to understand their perspective on what that change actually looks like and what it is going to mean.

That is a pretty big task. It is one that we will be actively looking at through the subcommittee, informed by works such as Mr Emerson's bill, the commitments within the Closing the Gap agreement and all the other recommendations that we have there. It is how we give action to those and it is how we drive the change that we want to see happen, walking together in what will truly be reconciliation when we get there.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (3.49): I started my very first speech in this place by acknowledging the traditional custodians and by acknowledging the lengthy history of my family in this area and the complexity of that relationship as well. The acknowledgement process is something that we do every day in this place. By a procedural quirk, today that did not happen. So I think it is very important at this point to genuinely acknowledge not just the traditional custodians of our land but also that lengthy history that leads us to exactly where we are today.

I wish that this bill was not necessary. I wish that racism was a thing of the past. I wish that the gap did not exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, let alone in the ACT. It is very easy for us, as we stand in this place—with our pristine walls; well-off with plenty of pay to get us by—to forget the gritty reality of the world outside. The fact is that too many people in our society have to contend with racism, and we should never accept that—not just in society but also in our public services and

especially in those services that are geared to help the very people who can be affected by racism. It should never be acceptable, and I am grateful that today we are making a declaration that it is not.

At the same time, it is very clear that the government have dragged their feet for too long on genuine action. There is a lengthy list of shadow ministers from our side who have sought to draw attention to many of the problems that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contend with—problems in education, the gap in health outcomes, the gap in justice and the gap in suicide rates. It takes a whole lot of work to overcome the legacy of history. The sad and gritty reality is that there are too many people contending with problems that I do not have to contend with.

I am grateful to Mr Emerson for bringing this bill, because the government had not. I am grateful to Mr Emerson for engaging across the chamber and taking the time to listen to the legitimate concerns about the potential impact of the first draft on our public servants, because there was real potential there. When we sat down in our office, we had a genuine conversation and came up with genuine actions that could alleviate those concerns—because action does matter. We have to move beyond nice, pretty words that say all the right things. We have to stop putting posturing over action and have to actually deliver for the people who are struggling.

As the government works through the implementation of this, the Canberra Liberals do have some concerns—and, again, they are concerns based on history. As some of us have already pointed out, those concerns are about the track record on things that should have been simple, like Boomanulla Oval, through to the deep, deep systematic problems that we saw highlighted in the Jumbunna report. The government needs to do better. It absolutely should not have been necessary for Mr Emerson to bring this today, because it should have been done.

That said, I started out by saying that symbols matter, and it fills me with great hope that, in the end today, we are going to walk forward together and we are going to pass a meaningful piece of legislation. It is my genuine hope that that piece of legislation leads to genuine change. I am very proud to say that we will absolutely be supporting this bill.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Bill agreed to in principle.

Detail stage

Bill, by leave, taken as a whole.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (3.55), by leave: I move amendments Nos 1 to 6 circulated in my name together [*see schedule 1 at page 3849*] and table a supplementary explanatory statement to the amendments.

The amendments that I am moving seek to harness the expertise within and outside of government to support meaningful implementation and effective evaluation of this

legislation. We have worked with legislative drafters to prepare and embed accurate, meaningful and implementable definitions of cultural capability, cultural safety and institutional racism. Getting these definitions right is critical to successful implementation. If a senior executive does not understand what building cultural capability looks like for them, nor working to eliminate institutional racism, we simply will not see the practical action and progress against the national agreement.

I also acknowledge that, in these government amendments, we have incorporated amendments proposed by Mr Emerson and that all the amendments I move have the support of the ACT Elected Body. Implementation of Essential Actions 3.5 and 4.3 requires consideration of practicalities of implementation in our unique ACT public service. As recommended by the committee inquiry, there is an amendment to delay the commencement of the bill to 1 July 2026 to ensure that there is time to properly plan and to safeguard against unintended consequences, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff within the public service.

In line with the recommendation in Essential Action 4.3, the recent annual report directions required reporting entities to report annual progress under both the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028 and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This is done through an impact statement and through the ACT Annual Report for the National Closing the Gap Agreement. This work is coordinated by the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in the ACT public service. This requirement has been met in the latest 2024-25 annual reports.

To further affirm this commitment, I have amendments in this package to apply the obligation to report on progress against the national agreement to a broader range of annual reports, including to align the reporting obligations with the Closing the Gap principle obligation in the Public Sector Management Act 1994. What this means is that any entity that is led by a senior executive service member or a statutory office holder, who must do their job in accordance with the Closing the Gap principle, must report on progress against the national agreement for their administrative unit or their entity as part of their Public Sector Management Act obligation.

Noting the existing reporting requirements and their distinct purposes, the government amendments give effect to the intent of section 7E by including the following reporting requirements in the act. Firstly, the *State of the Service* report that is prepared by the Head of Service about the operation of the entire public service must include a report on progress against the national agreement. That is section 5. A director-general annual report, which is prepared by each director-general of an administrative unit, must include a report on progress against the national agreement. That is section 6.

A public sector body annual report, which is prepared by the responsible director-general, a chief executive officer, a statutory office holder or an agency head, must include a report on progress against the national agreement. That is section 7. This, for example, would include the Legal Aid Commission or the ACT Architects Board.

A territory entity annual report, which must comply with the annual report direction, may be required to include a report on progress against the national agreement, depending on the annual report direction made for the relevant reporting year. Territory entities include organisations like Icon Water and the Canberra Institute of Technology.

Territory entity annual reports, the Officer of the Legislative Assembly annual reports and the Office of the Legislative Assembly annual reports are not covered by the same obligation as other annual reports, as they are not led by a senior executive service member or a statutory office holder.

There are further amendments in this set that require consultation on draft annual report directions with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. What these amendments mean is that the minister must provide the Elected Body with a copy of the proposed directions for the Elected Body's consideration, comment and any recommendations that they may have. Should the Elected Body provide recommendations, the minister will be required to respond in writing and to provide both the Elected Body's recommendations and the ministerial response to the relevant Legislative Assembly committee as part of the existing committee consultation process that is in section 9 of the act. The committee will have the benefit of these documents in providing their own recommendations and comments on the proposed annual report directions. This embeds transparency and accountability in the engagement of the Elected Body in annual reporting.

To ensure the government is also transparent with the broader community, the amendments will also require that the Elected Body recommendations and the ministerial response are tabled at the time the final annual report direction is tabled in this place—six days after the direction has been notified on the online Legislation Register.

Similarly, with respect to Essential Action 3.5, which recommends embedding cultural capability in the ACT public service employment requirements, as detailed at the recent hearings into the bill, a lot of work has already been done or is underway to deliver on this commitment. It is important to stress here that these new provisions lead progress in Australia. The ACT will be the first jurisdiction to require individual public servants to proactively demonstrate the way that they are transforming government institutions to deliver on the commitment to implement the national agreement.

Through the Cultural Transformation Branch in the Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy, the government works closely with the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in the Health and Community Services Directorate to deliver efforts under the Priority 3 reform of the Closing the Gap National Agreement. This work is centred on the transformation of government organisations to uplift cultural capability, enhance cultural safety and improve career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, amongst their other functions.

In order to achieve this intent, there are government amendments to clarify or insert definitions of key terms, aligning with existing definitions in the national agreement as much as possible. They also seek to present definitions in a way that aligns with best practice legislative drafting and frames the obligations as “actionable”, “measurable” and “ongoing”. Significantly, the Closing the Gap principle has been amended to more precisely capture the nature of cultural capability as a process of lifelong continuous learning, referred to as continual development in an employment context. This echoes the description used in the national agreement.

In presenting these amendments, I will provide some context as to how this principle

will operate within the current legislative framework that applies to public servants and their conduct at work. This amendment sits within division 2.2 of the Public Sector Management Act, which provides for administration of the public service and of public sector standards. Sections 7 to 9 of the act within this division place positive obligations on the public servants and SES members, including statutory office holders, to do their jobs in particular ways. This requires a demonstration of positive action.

Public servants are obliged to demonstrate the public sector values of respect, integrity, collaboration and innovation—reporting on this in their performance plan each year. The addition of the Closing the Gap principle to the behaviours required of SES members and of statutory office holders requires demonstration of the actions they have taken to satisfy this requirement.

(Extension of time granted.)

Under the government's amendments, an SES member will do their job in accordance with the Closing the Gap principle if: for provisions of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that relate to transformation or governance of government agencies—the SES member implements those provisions of the agreement, including by continually developing and demonstrating their cultural capability and continually developing the cultural capability of their business unit—and, for the Head of Service that means the entire public service—by promoting cultural safety; working to eliminate institutional racism in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For other provisions of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that relate to the SES member's job, the SES member needs to implement the provisions of the national agreement, or provide advice to the responsible minister about implementing those provisions.

There are also amendments to make clear how the new obligation on SES members and statutory office holders is to be read subject to other legal rights or requirements. This is important, as functions in an SES member's or a statutory office holder's job could appear to be in conflict with the new requirement. The practical effect of this provision is that an act or a decision is not invalid merely because a person fails to comply with the Closing the Gap principle and that nothing in the new Closing the Gap principle requirement creates in any person a legal right or gives rise to a civil cause of action. All of this seeks to ensure that SES members and statutory office holders can take positive steps to meet the new obligation without fear of liability and that proper statutory decisions that result in consequences related to the national agreement will not enliven concerns about proper application of relevant laws—for example, decisions in a correctional setting or those that relate to decisions to place children in out-of-home care.

Finally, the government supports the recommendation made by the committee in their inquiry into the bill that a post-implementation review is undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness and consequences of the legislation. In the amendments I have moved, there is a requirement that the review be initiated within 18 months after commencement of the provisions. This allows a reasonable time for implementation, evaluation and measurement, enabling the collection of an evidence base to support a review to be undertaken and to be tabled before the end of this parliamentary term of government.

With all of that, I commend all of the amendments to the Assembly. I thank the community members who are here to witness this debate. The technical side of it, as you have just heard, is quite complex. We thank members in advance for what I understand will be their support of these amendments and, I hope, the unanimous passing of this amended bill this afternoon.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (4.10): The Greens welcome the agreed amendments that align with the public accounts and administration committee's recommendations. The first major component, as Mr Barr was referring to, related to the annual reporting, which strengthens the transparency and accountability at the core of how this city operates. The Greens are optimistic that the process outlined in the amendments will ensure clarity and visibility should the Elected Body's recommendations not be incorporated into the government's path forward.

The second main aim of the amendments establishes a mechanism to hold the senior leadership specifically to account. This will help to drive a broader cultural shift throughout the service. I would like to recognise the bill's original intent to hold all public servants to account, in terms of Closing the Gap principles and the practical challenges that were encountered during the committee inquiry stage. While I agree with the path forward, as articulated in the amendments that we are debating here today, I believe it is important not to lose sight of the original intent for the entirety of the public service to be contributing towards Closing the Gap.

As crafted, the amendments today set out the senior executive service's role to ensure that they drive the change by setting the culture, the resources and the targets for the public servants within their areas of responsibility. I hope they treat this responsibility seriously, and I am prepared to hold them to account in their efforts to do just that. Both measures, as covered by the amendments, are promising and represent meaningful steps toward genuine accountability and towards Closing the Gap.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (4.12): I do not want to hold up the progress of this for long. However, I think it is important to note that the Canberra Liberals will not be opposing any of these amendments. Also, I want to note that I genuinely believe that the vast majority of public servants working in the ACT engage with the best of intentions. We do know what is said about good intentions; however, it is important that we also acknowledge the amount of work that so many of our public servants do, in trying to address the problems of history and work forward in a positive way.

It is also worth acknowledging that, as originally drafted, the first draft that we have all been engaging on would have required, potentially, declarations from the people mowing the lawns. That is what these amendments are about. It is about making sure that the legislation is workable and successful in achieving its aims.

I would like to acknowledge the concerns that have been raised and say wholeheartedly that we have to work towards that intent, while making sure that this is practical and has the best chance of delivering the outcomes that all of us want.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (4.13): It has already been a long debate. There is not much longer to go. I thank everyone who has joined us this afternoon in the Assembly.

I would especially like to acknowledge members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who have joined us in the gallery this afternoon, and I thank them for doing so. I want to reiterate the significance of your tireless advocacy and work to get us to this point today.

As I have said before in this place, it is not lost on me that those who have been most harmed by systemic injustices in our public institutions have continued to carry the disproportionate burden of pushing for change across those very institutions. I hope the passage of this bill today goes some way to addressing that imbalance. With that in mind, I am really pleased to have achieved apparent consensus support for this bill, with the amendments that the Chief Minister has moved.

I particularly want to thank Minister Stephen-Smith, the Chief Minister, and their offices for their collaborative engagement and extensive efforts to land an agreed position on the final form of the bill. These amendments were developed in close consultation with my office and with the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. I was very wary of any changes that might serve to water down the impact of this piece of legislation. I am happy to report that all the changes that I have requested, with input from community members along the way, have been incorporated into the amendments that are before us.

The proposed annual reports amendments ensure workability and drafting consistency with our current laws. As explained by the Chief Minister, feedback will be sought from the Elected Body each year on proposed annual reports directions. The Elected Body will have an opportunity to consult with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and the broader First Nations community in shaping their feedback. Any recommendations made by the Elected Body and, importantly, the minister's response to those recommendations, will be tabled in this Assembly and provided to the relevant Assembly committee.

This will allow both the committee and the Assembly more broadly to scrutinise the extent of shared decision-making reflected in the government's annual reporting approach, as well as allowing the Elected Body to ensure the nature of its advocacy on behalf of our local First Nations community is made public, to reinforce its position as the voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in the ACT.

Whereas the original version of the bill committed government employees to implementing the principles of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the amendments that are before us, I would say, strengthen obligations imposed on senior executive service officers and statutory office holders by requiring them to implement the provisions of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap relating to the transformation or governance of government agencies, and to implement or, where appropriate, advise the relevant minister on how to implement all other provisions of the national agreement that are relevant to each senior executive's work.

Importantly, implementing the provisions of the national agreement means implementing the four priority reforms which we have discussed—strengthening and establishing formal partnerships and shared decision-making, building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, transforming government organisations so that they work better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,

and improving and sharing access to data and information to enable our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make informed decisions.

This obligation also captures the 19 socio-economic outcome areas identified in the national agreement and the targets set for those outcome areas, including: to close the gap in life expectancy within a generation; to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birth weight to 91 per cent; to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25 to 34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification to 70 per cent; to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent; to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized housing to 88 per cent; to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15 per cent; to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in detention by at least 30 per cent; to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent; to reduce the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children by at least 50 per cent, as progress towards zero; and to achieve a significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero, and more.

These are ambitious targets. Courtesy of the new Closing the Gap principle being inserted today into the Public Sector Management Act, this amended bill will make it clear that, by law, it is the job of senior public servants to play their part in helping to achieve these targets.

I want to thank the public accounts and administration committee for their inquiry into this bill. They have made recommendations that are reflected in these amendments. There is the delayed commencement date to provide time for the public service to prepare for the significant increase in accountability and whole-of-government transformation necessitated by this piece of legislation. The eagerness to see a delayed commencement date, to me, is a signal that these are not just words on a piece of paper but that there is a need to create change that reflects the obligations created by this bill.

There is a post-implementation review to ensure the legislation is operating effectively and, as we have discussed, that senior executive service officers and statutory office holders will be bound by these new obligations, rather than all public servants regardless of classification, to ensure that the appropriate level of responsibility sits with the real decision-makers within the public service.

The original drafting of the bill did propose to apply the new Closing the Gap principle to all public servants, and I have been sympathetic to concerns that have been raised by me and echoed in this debate, including by Ms Barry, regarding imposing a legal obligation to implement the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, promote cultural safety, demonstrate cultural capability and address institutional racism on junior staff without the decision-making authority to ensure this is actually occurring in their day-to-day work.

Further, if a junior staff member were to be directed by their manager to do something they feel conflicts with their new obligations under the Closing the Gap principle, they

would have to choose whether to adhere to their legislated obligations to follow those kinds of directions or to adhere to their legislated obligations under this bill. I can understand the concern that this would create an unreasonable legal and ethical conflict for junior staff.

Ultimately, the intent of the bill is to create systemic behavioural change by holding government decision-makers accountable for their commitments under the national agreement. It is those in senior leadership positions who have the power to bring about the transformational change within government, including by ensuring their staff are educated and empowered to implement commitments under the national agreement in their day-to-day work.

With this in mind, I am happy with the proposed amendment, which I had already drafted and circulated before the committee's inquiry, that would make it the legal responsibility only of senior executive officers and statutory office holders to ensure this principle is upheld and exemplified throughout the administrative unit for which they are responsible, including in the work of their staff.

This is appropriate for the current structure of the two existing public sector principles contained in the Public Sector Management Act. Assuming this amendment is supported today, which it seems it will be, the following hierarchy would result. The existing best-practice principle will apply to all public servants, requiring them to work efficiently, effectively and constructively, to be responsive, collaborative and accountable and to make fair and reasonable decisions.

The new Closing the Gap principle will apply to senior executives and statutory office holders. The existing merit and equity principle applies to the Head of Service, requiring them to be an equitable employer; in other words, to employ a person in a job who is best able to do the job in all the circumstances, ensuring that this happens across the service.

The 2024-25 *State of the service report* indicated that there were 349 senior executives employed across the ACT government. Along with statutory office holders, that is a lot of people in positions of power who will be required specifically by law to drive the systemic change sought by this bill. Should we all turn out to be incorrect on that, should these provisions not function entirely as intended, the post-implementation review introduced by these amendments offers an opportunity to revisit the scope of employees bound by these new obligations.

To put it simply, I am assured that the final version of the amendments that are before us really do serve to improve this bill and not to water it down, as I feared they might. I will be supporting them. Again, I thank the Chief Minister and the Minister for the Public Service in particular, and all of my colleagues across the Assembly, for their good-faith collaboration and engagement on this important reform. We will be voting on this. We will see whether there are other speakers. I will speak again; then we will vote on the bill a little bit after that. I know members are aware of that.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Amendments 1 to 6 agreed to.

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question now is that the bill, as a whole, as amended, be agreed to.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (4.23): That was quick. I am back! We have been talking about Closing the Gap for 20 years. I believe—and, I think, everyone in this Assembly; I certainly hope so—that the ACT can be the first state or territory to actually do it.

In 2020, the ACT government signed the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, committing to work together with other governments and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and peak bodies to overcome the inequality that they have experienced for generations. In doing so, the government acknowledged that a fundamental shift was needed in how it works with and for the First Nations community and signed up to a clear blueprint for bringing about that shift.

As a signatory to the national agreement, the ACT government committed to “mobilising all avenues and opportunities available to them” to “overcome the entrenched inequality faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, so that their life outcomes are equal to all Australians”. Yet now, five years later, and two years after the ACT stood alone as the only jurisdiction to vote yes in the Voice to Parliament referendum, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to suffer disproportionately from devastating cycles of entrenched disadvantage.

We are nowhere near on track to meet our targets nationally, and in the ACT the gap remains wide, and has been widening, in multiple critical areas. To offer one example, according to the Australian Early Development Census released in June this year, only 24.1 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the ACT are developmentally on track in all five domains—physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. It is the second lowest rate in Australia. It is a decrease from 41 per cent in 2009, down to under 25 per cent today, despite the agreed target of 55 per cent by 2031.

This year’s census data also shows that, for the first time, more than half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in the ACT—52 per cent—are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains. This rate drops to 27.2 per cent for non-Indigenous children in our community. What is going on here?

The data shows irrefutably that, even in very early childhood, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT are massively disadvantaged, which reflects the message I am hearing repeatedly from our First Nations community that not only is the system failing them, but also we can close the gap if we all play our part in making it happen.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should not be disproportionately removed from their parents. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people should not be disproportionately detained. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults should not be disproportionately imprisoned. The fact that they are, by a massive margin, is a clear sign of serious systemic failure and it is clear evidence of institutional racism, which the amendments we have just voted in favour of define as “the inequitable

treatment and outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a result of an entity's policies, practice and culture".

I know some members of our community, and perhaps even of this Assembly, will roll their eyes when they hear claims of racism. They do not want to talk about it. But institutional racism does not just refer to overt racial slurs or segregation. It also means—and this is something we cannot continue to deny—that the massive and consistent gaps in outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT compared with non-Indigenous Canberrans show that the institutions we have established are not serving everyone.

The systems built by us have been built in a way, deliberately or not, that does discriminate; they have been built in a way that clearly delivers different outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The structures of power that non-Indigenous Australians have established empower us in a way that disempowers our country's first peoples. The data shows undeniably that the services we have developed are too often serving only us, rather than serving all of us.

We need to have the courage to grapple with all the evidence we have that our institutions do obviously produce inequitable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans. And we need to be willing to ask ourselves why. Why is this the case? Asking that question in this place, behind the closed doors of government and out in our community, is the first step to having real change. If we ask that question not just of ourselves but of the members of our First Nations community who suffer the consequences of the inadequacies of our systems, and who know what is happening on the ground and what works best for them, we might just get the answers we need to create that change.

We need to be willing to divest power, to share power, in order to learn from and incorporate into our policies, practices and culture the experience, reflections and priorities of the 76 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT who report experiencing racial prejudice—76 per cent. Only then will we be able to work in genuine partnership, as we committed to under the national agreement. Seventy-six per cent is the highest rate in the country. It is a statistic that is an affront to our self-stated values as Canberrans, and just pretending that it is not an issue is preventing us from addressing it.

We also need to ask what is at the heart of our reluctance to ask ourselves questions like these? Questions like: why is it that the self-reported experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our community is perpetually shaped by discrimination? Perhaps we struggle with engaging in these conversations because of fear: fear of the uncertainty inherent in softening one's grip on power; fear of the vulnerability that comes with relinquishing control; fear not of the unintended consequences of this bill, as the opposition leader spoke to, but of its intended consequences; fear of how it might feel for us to listen—to really listen—to what the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the gallery here have to say about how they feel; and, above all, the deep fear that we might be challenged by what we hear. Perhaps we will be changed by what we hear.

The same sceptics who are reluctant to consider the reality of institutional racism in the

ACT might also respond with cynicism to someone of my appearance, from a privileged background, speaking these words and bringing this bill to the Assembly. Is this just virtue signalling? Am I just playing identity politics? They are easy questions to ask if you do not want to ask the hard questions. No, it is not about virtue, identity, white guilt or a contest to see who is the most progressive. It is about accepting the responsibility imposed on those of us who, through the lottery of life, find ourselves in a privileged position, to connect with the experiences of those who do not, who face systemic disadvantage. It is about fairness, and creating systems that work for everyone, not just for the people by whom they were created. It is about accountability—doing what we said we would do, with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is about reconciliation, and not just making apologies but making amends. More than that, it is about making it right.

We reconcile by looking back, by being honest with ourselves and each other about the harm, the trauma and the shame inherent in the shared history between our peoples, but also not by letting ourselves be defined perpetually by that past. We reconcile by looking forward, asking ourselves and each other what kind of future we want to share together. Do we want a future shaped by the power imbalances created by the historical imposition of authority on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by colonial forces, or are we willing to confront the remnants of that unfairness, the traces of those historical events, that persist in our public institutions today? Are we willing to ask whether they do and look at how they do, and to get real about the impact that the very nature of those institutions continues to have on the scope and scale of the gap in life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people?

I am far from an expert on any of this, but there are plenty of experts in the gallery today, out in our community, and represented in our Elected Body and on the Joint Council on Closing the Gap. The experts are there, their advice is available and their wisdom is ready to be heard.

This bill calls on senior government officials and statutory office holders to step into this complex space, to have those hard conversations and make a firm commitment to transformational systemic change, to genuine shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. More than that, it defines doing so as a core part of their job. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is an incredible document, establishing a clear governance framework for shared decision-making aimed at improving the life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Since the signing of the agreement, multiple reviews have criticised governments for failing to follow through on their Closing the Gap commitments.

Recommendations have been made as to what governments need to do differently to implement their obligations under the agreement. In February 2024, the Productivity Commission published its first review of implementation progress under the national agreement. It found:

The Agreement's reforms have not been prioritised by governments.

It stated:

It is too easy to find examples of government decisions that contradict commitments in the Agreement ...

And described current progress described as “weak”, reflecting “business-as-usual approaches”.

The review found that “the transformation of government organisations has barely begun”, “performance reporting provides only a partial picture of progress” due to “critical gaps in data” and that “accountability for delivering on the commitments in the agreement is lacking”.

In June 2025, the Coalition of Peaks published the first independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review of implementation of the national agreement, carried out by the Jumbunna Institute. It found:

Despite the language of genuine partnership, Government departments continue to operate in traditional ways, setting the agenda, controlling extremely short timeframes and expecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to respond on their terms.

It also found:

Governments have been slow on attitudinal and systemic change, despite some evidence of individuals and teams within government that are championing reform.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review called for local governments to step up to their Closing the Gap commitments under the national agreement.

In July 2025, the Jumbunna Institute published the final report from its independent review into the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT justice system. It included chapters on decision-making, accountability and coordination, systemic racism, education, child protection, youth justice, imprisonment, and more. The review made 99 recommendations, while noting that:

... a core problem has been the failure of government to implement multiple recommendations which are often repeated from one inquiry to the next over many years.

It found that:

Lack of understanding of systemic racism within the ACT Government can lead to unconscious bias and makes it hard to challenge this issue.

A whole of government response to systemic racism is essential ...

I will keep going on about some of these reviews. The ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body holds public hearings with government officials twice in every three-year term, which support it to fulfill its scrutiny and accountability functions. During these hearings and in the reports produced by them, the Elected Body has repeatedly raised concerns about the issues reflected in today’s debate.

In its 11th report, coming out of the August 2023 hearings, the Elected Body focused closely on the national agreement. Its first recommendation for directorates was:

Know your commitments—both the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement has specific actions and targets that need to be reached.

In its 12th report to the ACT government, coming out of the April 2024 hearings, the Elected Body found:

Those Hearings showed that the ACT Government needed to significantly uplift their understanding of the commitments in both the national and ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreements.

It also noted:

... the presence of systemic discrimination needs a systemic response—not simply a framework, but education, training, cultural immersion, revision of legislation and policies, understanding of service access, delivery and experience, recruitment and employment experience. It needs to be across every aspect of the ACT government responsibility and service delivery.

The message has been consistent. Accountability has been lacking, action has been limited, change has been slow, and outcomes have continued to worsen as a consequence. As Julie Tongs, the relentless CEO of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services, who joins us in the chamber today, would say, how many reviews and reports have to say the same thing before we actually do something about it? I hope that, for Ms Tongs, who spent almost three decades fighting for justice for her people and saying nothing ever changes, today represents the start of significant change.

It is time to deliver. This bill responds directly to these many reviews and reports, actioning their core findings and recommendations by embedding accountability for delivering on the promises made in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap in the very laws that govern the core obligations of the ACT public service.

I first started working on this bill after members of our local First Nations community asked me to seek answers about the ACT's progress under the national agreement. I sought this information from the government and, based on their responses, I had further questions and further conversations with a range of community leaders about the appropriate next steps. I asked the government if they were preparing legislation to give effect to their commitments and was told that they were not. What emerged from there was a strong, community-driven proposal for legislative reform that reflects the needs and preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT, while also aligning clearly with commitments already made by the ACT government.

Based on those early discussions, I worked with the Parliamentary Counsel's Office to develop a consultation draft of the bill, which I shared, seeking feedback from local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, First Nations community leaders, the Elected Body and the Coalition of Peaks. I continued to consult with the First Nations

community throughout the drafting of the bill, during the inquiry process and in the development of amendments.

All of this is to say that, while I happen to be the person who is in a position to stand on this floor and introduce this legislation, it is not really my bill. Countless voices, perspectives and experiences other than my own have shaped the development of the legislation we are voting on this afternoon, and I want to acknowledge some of the other people who brought us to this point.

First of all, there is Paula McGrady, former Deputy Chair of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, ACT rep at joint council when the recommendations that this bill implements were agreed to and, of course, Independent candidate for Murrumbidgee in the 2024 election. We ran as candidates together, and Paula spent most of the campaign chewing my ear off about the national agreement and the priority reforms. Hopefully, we are doing something about it today.

To current members of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, whose recommendations have been ignored for too long, thank you for all your work on this bill and advocating for your people. You have a critical role to play in ensuring that the implementation framework developed on the back of the passage of this legislation is shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

In 2008, we became the first jurisdiction to legislate for a democratically Elected Body to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT. While the Victorian government has allocated \$82 million to support their First Peoples Assembly in its work on historic treaty negotiations, the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body remains hugely under-resourced. Remunerating members on a part-time basis obviously is not good enough, and addressing the under-resourcing of this important entity sufficiently is critical if we are serious about shared decision-making.

To the many other First Nations community members who are in the gallery today and across the ACT, please note that the passage of this bill creates clear accountability standards for people in senior leadership positions within government in relation to their Closing the Gap commitments. Those public servants work for you, as do all of us here in the chamber.

I say to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants working within the ACT government that this bill aims to address the immense cultural and emotional load that you experience, straddling the space between government and community, wishing you could do more to create changes on both sides of the fence, knowing you could, with more support from non-Indigenous colleagues and senior leaders. This bill, I hope, creates an authorising environment for real change. If a senior leader does not show an interest in taking your advice seriously about cultural safety, cultural capability or addressing institutional racism, you will be able to tell them it is their job to do so. And if they still do not listen, for as long as I am here in this place, you can come and chat with me, and you will have a voice in the Assembly who is an ally for you.

I also want to thank the Parliamentary Counsel's Office for all their work on this bill and the amendments to it, and for their expert advice on how to ensure this piece of legislation is purpose-built for us here in the ACT. I want to give a massive shout-out

to my incredible team, who have all worked on this tirelessly in a wide range of different ways, and again to all the community members and allies who have shaped this bill and repeatedly voiced their support for it along the way.

This bill can be a turning point, but, more than that, it needs to be a turning point. For too long, Closing the Gap initiatives have been treated like optional extras. Today, the Assembly votes to change that, by reframing closing the gap in life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as core government business, making the ACT the first state or territory to embed its commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap in the laws that define the responsibilities and reporting requirements of senior government officials and government agencies.

Finally, I want to thank all my Assembly colleagues for agreeing today to support this legislation, for sitting through a long speech, and voting in favour of mobilising the entire public sector, from the top down, to start delivering on our Closing the Gap commitments.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Bill, as a whole, as amended, agreed to.

Bill, as amended, agreed to.

ACT Ambulance Service—staffing

MS MORRIS (Brindabella) (4.42): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) the ACT Ambulance Service moved to a 44 hour roster without ensuring the operational readiness, workforce planning or service capacity required to support the change;
- (b) the Government was aware of the identified implementation risks, including the likelihood of increased below-minimum crewing and greater reliance on overtime if preparations were not completed before the roster commenced, yet proceeded regardless; and
- (c) despite recommendations for independent scrutiny, the Government chose instead to undertake an internal review of its own implementation process;

(2) further notes that:

- (a) since the commencement of the new roster, the ACT Ambulance Service has experienced sustained increases in below-minimum crewing, particularly on night shifts, together with a growing reliance on overtime to maintain basic service operations;
- (b) these pressures have created avoidable strain on paramedics and other ambulance staff, including increased fatigue, reduced ability to take leave, higher burnout risk, and impact on morale;
- (c) reduced ambulance availability, uncrewed periods at stations, and longer

wait times across priority categories have placed the community at increased risk, particularly during night-time hours and for higher-acuity cases; and

- (d) safe and sustainable working conditions for ambulance staff, and reliable ambulance availability, are fundamental to community safety and depend on sound planning, operational readiness and accountable decision-making; and
- (3) calls on the Government to:
- (a) take immediate operational action to stabilise roster coverage and prevent below-minimum crewing;
 - (b) table, in the first sitting week of next year, a comprehensive workforce management and implementation plan that sets out clear milestones for achieving roster stability and minimum crewing coverage across all shifts;
 - (c) commence monthly public reporting on:
 - (i) the number of shifts that operated below-minimum crewing;
 - (ii) overtime hours worked; and
 - (iii) any stations that were unstaffed, uncrewed, or unable to operate; and
 - (d) report back to the Assembly in the first sitting week of 2026 on the progress of implementation of recommendations in the ACT Ambulance Service Roster Review.

Canberrans should be able to trust that life-saving ambulance services will be available for them when they need it, regardless of the time of day or night. A health emergency can strike at any moment—in the dead of night, in the quiet of dawn or in the throes of a tightly packed day—and that is why we need an ambulance service that can respond to critical incidents as soon as they occur.

Our Ambulance Service staff and paramedics work tirelessly to deliver the life-saving care that our community expects. They feel the weight of their duty, and every day they walk into critical emergencies with professionalism and dignity. They are skilled at bringing calm and expert action to a crisis, and, as I have personally observed, they know how to insert just the right amount of gentle humour to lighten a distressing situation.

Much is asked of them and they willingly serve because they know the stakes are high. People's lives depend on their services. That is why it is a matter of greatest importance that our Ambulance Service and paramedics are respected and cared for, and that they are given the tools that they need to get on with their life-saving work. That means rosters that are fully staffed, stations that are properly crewed and a government that listens when frontline staff and their representatives raise concerns. Instead, in the ACT, they are often confronted with the impossible moral burden of having to close ambulance stations and attend some incidents at the expense of others.

This burden has arisen because the government has failed to plan and properly respond to increasingly obvious pressures on our Ambulance Service. I have heard directly from paramedics about the emotional injury this causes the workforce. One wrote to me to

ask how, while demand for ambulance services is rising significantly every year, the government could build a station but not provide for the additional staff needed to operate it or deal with the wider problem of understaffing. The officer continued:

At some point there will be a serious adverse event because of this situation. Whilst my first concern is for the member/s of the community who will suffer, my next immediate concern is for my colleagues, both paramedics on road and the workers in our communication centre who experience moral injury every time they can't make it to someone who needs our care because of shortages and lack of resourcing.

This officer's experience was confirmed to me during annual reports hearings when officials revealed that ambulance stations were closed on six separate occasions in October alone, totalling 38 hours of lost coverage, and that was due to staff shortages. The recently handed down *ACT Ambulance roster review* confirms the pressures that our Ambulance Service and officers face. Consider these findings in the review:

Since implementation of the 44-hour roster the percentage of 'shifts below minimum crewing' increased from an average of 31% to 67% ...

Worse still, the review found:

The average percentage of night shifts below minimum crewing increased from 38% to 96% ...

Let me put this a different way: night shifts met minimum crewing standards only four per cent of the time. The government implemented the new 44-hour roster before they had the workforce to fill it. The roster was first devised in 2020, voted on in 2022 and implemented in 2024. It is now 2025 and they still have not been able to adequately resource the transition to the new roster. The government was warned that, unless more staff were secured, the roster would lead to more shifts running below minimum staffing levels, more overtime and slower responses.

What this motion today is not about is blaming the minister, because I know these decisions were made in the previous Assembly and are another legacy of a tired government that has run out of not only ideas but also the enthusiasm to implement them. The consequences of this inaction are now being felt by staff, Canberrans who wait nervously for an ambulance, and all Canberrans who expect that, when anyone dials 000, help will arrive quickly for them.

This is about safety. When a shift runs below minimum levels, the operational pressures land on our paramedics and, in turn, on the very people who need their help. It lands on the young basketball player who, just a few months ago, laid with a fractured vertebra for 90 minutes, waiting for help after a backboard collapsed on him. It lands on the elderly man who fell from his mobility scooter onto an ant nest only last week and was left suffering for two hours, tended to by good Samaritans, while he waited for an ambulance. And it lands on an elderly woman in her 80s who fell coming out of the shower and had to wait, undressed on the floor, for six hours for assistance to arrive.

These are real examples of the effect of government inaction. That is why this motion focuses on real and practical steps. It demands the government takes immediate operational action to stabilise roster coverage and prevent below-minimum crewing. It

requires planning, by the first sitting week of next year, for a workforce management and implementation strategy with clear milestones for achieving roster stability and minimum crewing across all shifts. And it seeks transparency, with routine public reporting on how many shifts run below minimum, the number of overtime hours worked, and any stations that are understaffed or unable to operate. It is about basic accountability. It requires the government to report back in the first sitting week of 2026 on progress on implementing the roster review's recommendations. It means the Assembly and the community can track whether change is happening and if it is working.

I know the government will say that they are recruiting, and that is good, but give us a timeline and the clear targets for that. Show the workforce that there is a plan to get every shift above minimum and that the burden will not sit indefinitely on the shoulders of the same tired officers. Our paramedics deserve fully staffed stations, shifts above minimum levels and a roster they can plan their lives around. This motion is practical, fair and focused on critical service delivery. It is about putting planning, transparency and accountability at the centre of ambulance operations.

Much is asked of our ambulance officers, and they do it without complaint. As we head into the holiday period, many will be working through Christmas and New Year's celebrations while the rest of us are gathered with family and friends. They will be the ones answering the call for help. The public is thankful for all they do, and our job in the Assembly is to back them with the resources and staffing they need to keep Canberra safe.

I thank the minister and the Greens for their engagement with our office on this. I am pleased that we could reach an agreement on it and a pathway forward, which will be reflected in the amendments to be moved by my colleague. I commend this motion to the Assembly.

DR PATERSON (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Women, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, Minister for Corrections and Minister for Gaming Reform) (4.51): I thank Ms Morris for her motion on ACT Ambulance Service resourcing and the current roster system.

I would like to begin by rebutting Ms Morris's characterisation of a tired, old government. I want to assure her and the Canberra Liberals and the community that I am a highly energised, inspired minister. What inspires me most is that 24 hours a day, every day of the year, ACT Ambulance Service paramedics, intensive care clinicians, call takers, communications staff and support teams respond to the most urgent situations people will ever face. They meet Canberrans in moments of fear, grief, pain and trauma. They deliver care, compassion and clinical excellence that consistently ranks among the strongest in the country. They shoulder a year-on-year significant increase in workload and they do so with professionalism, dedication and an unwavering commitment to public service. I thank every member of our ACT Ambulance Service for the critical role you play in our community and acknowledge the extraordinary dedication of our paramedics.

The opposition's motion and Ms Morris's comments do not accurately represent the

government's actions or the review's findings. I will correct the inaccuracies and demonstrate that—while challenges exist, as they do in every ambulance service in Australia—the government's support of our ACT Ambulance Service is strong, transparent and informed by evidence.

The transition to a new roster—the first major roster reform in over four decades—was not rushed. It was the product of detailed work undertaken over a considerable period, involving consultation with paramedics, operational leaders, rostering specialists and workforce advisers. The government supported the transition precisely because it addressed long-standing fatigue risks and because paramedics themselves consistently advocated for a shift away from the previous roster, which placed enormous strain on paramedics and on work-life balance, and which challenged people's ability to meet family commitments. The independent external review confirms this. Staff overwhelmingly support the new roster model, describing improved rest patterns and improved alignment with modern clinical expectations. The review explicitly states that the roster model has significantly improved the wellbeing and work-life balance for our ACT Ambulance Service staff.

The previous roster was introduced in 1983. It was a 48-hour cycle comprising of two 10-hour day shifts and two 14-hour night shifts in a four on/four off pattern, commonly known as the 10/14 roster. However, after sustained discussion with ACTAS staff and the TWU, it was acknowledged that this roster was no longer viable, with consideration to the unsustainable impact of consecutive night shifts on our frontline staff. Following a staff survey in November 2020, alternative roster options were developed based on agreed rostering principles, including improved coverage during peak demand; maintaining one core roster with a four-by-four pattern; shorter and fewer night shifts; fairness, equity and predictability; and a roster that supports work-life balance while minimising loss of pay and entitlements.

In April 2022, a ballot of ACTAS Emergency Operations members was conducted via Elections ACT with three alternative roster options presented. The option elected by the majority of staff was a 44-hour roster with a four-by-four shift pattern consisting of one 10-hour morning shift, one 12-hour day shift, one 12-hour afternoon shift and one 10-hour night shift. The ACTAS TWU Emergency Roster Working Group was established in 2022 to identify the work required and to advise on the transition path for the implementation of the 44-hour roster. Due to the overlapping shift patterns, the 44-hour roster requires greater numbers of paramedics than the 10/14 roster. ACTAS identified the need for more full-time positions to see the full implementation of the 44-hour roster. In the 2023-24 budget, ACTAS received \$19.7 million over four years to enable and support the implementation of this roster.

The ACT government committed to undertake a review of the roster 12 months after its commencement to allow a full year's data to be analysed. I commend the ACTAS review team for the work they have done to produce an excellent evidence base to inform future budget and operational decisions. Their work was conducted in accordance with the terms of reference, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive evidence-based assessment. The reviewers note that the roster was developed through subject matter expertise and reflects contemporary best practice principles in fatigue management for a 24-hour emergency service.

The review presents strong insights into the issues and a deep understanding of the operational opportunities and challenges. The review found that, while the roster remains a credible model, its effectiveness has been constrained by a range of factors, including rapidly-growing demand for ambulance services; national workforce shortages affecting paramedic recruitment; increased leave utilisation and staff attrition, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic; a growing number of staff requiring extra training hours, development time and clinical upskilling; increased requirements for rostering flexibility to support staff wellbeing; and a significant increase in demand for low-acuity care.

While I recognise these constraints on the workforce, the recommendations in the report provide the government a pathway forward, and I am committed to working with the ESA and ACTAS leadership and the TWU and ACTAS staff to consider the pathway forward to strengthen the service. The key priority for ACTAS and its workforce is to ensure the workforce management and implementation plan is developed and consulted with key stakeholders and, most importantly, that it is achievable. This work has already commenced.

It was very exciting in May this year when we welcomed the new ACTAS Chief Officer, David Dutton, to the service. He made a commitment to undertake a 90-day whole-of-organisation diagnostic in parallel to the work underway on the 44-hour emergency operations roster review. The Chief Officer announced five key priorities for ACTAS in early November. They included staff wellbeing and patient safety; rostering and resourcing; ComCen, public notification app; and a path to accreditation. The key priorities will be underpinned by specific, measurable actions that the ACTAS senior leadership team will progress and report back to staff. In the recent annual report hearings, the Chief Officer confirmed that ACTAS is on track to meet its currently funded staff establishment in March 2026. It is important to note that the roster review identified that “beyond brief periods of reprieve, these compounding and cascading challenges have left ACTAS unable to resolve persistent and pervasive workforce shortages that existed long before the consideration of a new roster”.

Demand on our ambulance service is at an all-time high. In the last financial year, ACTAS received 67,000 000 calls. This is up 7.8 per cent from the previous year. Despite this growing demand, the ACT has continued to record some of the best response times in the country as well as high levels of patient satisfaction and maintain the service’s strong commitment to clinical safety. We are not seeing the ambulance ramping that has been since in other parts of Australia since the pandemic. This is testament to the ACT’s unique model of ambulance provision and a more resilient ambulance service than other jurisdictions.

If a station is operating below minimum crewing, or not open, that does not mean that one part of the ACT is not being responded to. ACTAS paramedics respond to jobs dynamically and often not from the station where they started their shift. The nearest available ambulance is dispatched to an incident and the nearest available ambulance may not necessarily be the one from the nearest ambulance station. ACTAS resources are strategically spread across nine stations in the ACT: in Dickson, Belconnen, Woden, Calwell, Fyshwick, Gungahlin, Greenway, West Belconnen and Acton. If a station is not open, that does not mean that one part of the ACT is not being responded to.

When ACTAS is aware that there are insufficient staffing levels to resource all nine stations, all efforts are made to backfill the rostered shifts. This includes offering overtime; requesting staff to move from day shift to night shift; requesting shift extensions from staff on the prior shift; and asking staff if they would be willing to return from annual leave. I want to acknowledge the impost on our ACTAS staff of these requests and commend them for continuing to consistently show up. It is important to acknowledge that ACTAS staff, like everyone else, may experience illnesses and require unexpected time off work, which can also impact staffing levels. ACTAS has a robust set of protocols for business continuity in place if it identifies the risk of low staffing numbers. As stated previously, if a member of the Canberra community calls for an ambulance in a life-threatening situation, they can have confidence in ACTAS's ability to respond.

In closing, our ACTAS staff are hardworking, highly-skilled individuals who provide quality health care to the community. The review and its subsequent report do not suggest otherwise. Our paramedics are telling us that this roster is working for them. It is now about building on the good work already done to support the sustainability of the service into the future. Thank you.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (5.03): The recent ambulance roster review has illuminated the many and deeply embedded challenges facing the ACT ambulance workforce. The Greens support the intent behind this motion, which highlights the pressing issues confronting our frontline workers, particularly the increasing call volumes paired with insufficient staffing to meet that demand. Supporting these workers is not optional; it is essential.

Addressing these challenges is crucial not just for the workforce but also for the community that relies on their care. Insufficient staffing has an enormous ripple effect across the service. For instance, reduced educator capacity limits access to essential specialist training, including licensed driver skills, intensive care comms, call triaging and child protection training. Staffing scarcity also means management is pushed into the uncomfortable position of being reactive rather than anticipatory of issues.

Our paramedics are under immense pressure and being worked to the bone. The effects of fatigue, low morale and burnout are crystal clear. It is satisfying to see the positive feedback from frontline staff on the improvements that the new roster has provided in terms of fatigue management. The fact that it is now a recruitment attraction point, luring interstate paramedics to the ACT, is another bonus for that roster. However, we cannot just rely on the roster itself, because, whilst there is broad consensus that the updated roster is well received by the workforce, the underlying issues remain. Workforce scarcity places immense pressure upon the staff. The insufficient staffing is mutually detrimental. Frontline workers are placed in unsafe and unjust conditions, while the community receives care under compromised circumstances. It is reassuring that the ambulance roster review has amplified the desire to address this variety of issues.

We acknowledge the Labor government's desire to create a fulsome road map towards solutions, and we also appreciate Ms Morris's highlighting of the urgency of the situation—urgency informed by the longstanding and systemic nature of these

challenges. It is clear that, while roster reform may alleviate some staffing pressures during the day shifts, it is clearly insufficient for night shifts, where staffing levels have halved. This is a testament to the necessity of the changes laid out in the motion.

I will talk briefly to the amendments that have been circulated—just to prevent me from having to get up again. I would like to thank Ms Morris and Dr Paterson and their offices for their negotiation to achieve an outcome here. I do wish to make a few points that reflect my involvement in all parties agreeing to the amendments as have been circulated.

Firstly, there is currently no plan for all stations to operate 24/7. For example, the Acton station opened this year without additional staffing, resulting in a crew being moved from Dickson, yielding no net gain to ACT-wide staffing. The same approach is planned for the opening of Molonglo next year. Our request for information on when all stations will be staffed 24/7 is crucial for understanding the scale of the issue and potential solutions.

Secondly, the current reporting does not detail whether stations are staffed by single response units. A standard ambulance requires two paramedics to transport a patient; whereas a single response unit cannot perform this function. Single response units have an important and essential part to play. They can support standard crews where an extra pair of hands or additional skills may be required or they can act as first responders under time-pressured circumstances. My concern is that current reporting of stations being open or shut and ambulances being operational is devoid of the detail regarding whether they actually have a patient-carrying capability or not. This obscures the reality of the workforce's capacity and its capability to provide for the Canberra community. This knowledge is essential for accurate workforce planning.

Finally, we see short staffing as being directly responsible for issues with leave within the service. Anecdotal information from some ambulance officers is that extended periods of understaffing have created a service-wide accrual of untaken annual leave. Requesting information of when leave liabilities are expected to return to normal offers valuable insight regarding the path towards a sustainable service.

Overall, the Greens are deeply concerned by the pressures faced by the ACT ambulance workforce, particularly in facing the combination of rising call volumes and insufficient staffing. We support the intent of this motion and stand ready to work towards the practical solutions that safeguard both our frontline workers and the community that depends upon them.

I take this opportunity to thank all ACT ambulance officers for their service towards our community that they provide 24/7. Thank you.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (5.08): I move:

Omit paragraphs (3)(b) and (3)(c), substitute:

“(b) table, in the second sitting week of March 2026, a comprehensive workforce management and implementation plan that sets out clear milestones for achieving roster stability, minimum crewing coverage across all shifts and the timeline of when the government plans to have

all stations staffed 24/7;

- (c) commence public reporting every quarter on:
 - (i) the number of shifts that operated below minimum crewing;
 - (ii) overtime hours worked;
 - (iii) any stations that were unstaffed, uncrewed, staffed by only a single paramedic or unable to operate; and
 - (iv) when the service expects for the service-wide annual leave liability to return to ordinary levels; and”.

This amendment has had a significant amount of consultation and engagement across all parties, because it was important to land a position that was practical and could be delivered. I do not think anyone is 100 per cent happy with where we have got to. We accept that the government was not able to respond as rapidly as Ms Morris’s original motion had asked. That said, we think that the second sitting week of March is a lengthy period of time and we would certainly be hoping that the response that we get is commensurate with the additional time that has been provided to the government.

In the same vein, with commencing public reporting every quarter, rather than the monthly basis that we had asked for, we understand that there is an impact on public servants, and we want to look after our public servants and make sure that we are not just giving them “busy work”. At the same time, I would hope that the government would make sure that they can be adequately proactive when they are undertaking this reporting and, if anything comes up that the Assembly should be made aware of, share that with members of the Assembly.

I have to commend the process of engagement that Ms Morris led throughout this. It started before the motion was even tabled. She has been talking with my office for some time. She has genuinely brought an approach to this that seeks to navigate the difficulties that have been experienced with this rostering system and get to solutions, not just complain about the problem.

I foreshadow that I will be speaking again on Ms Morris’s behalf as she has had to leave for an unavoidable appointment. But I do want to take this opportunity to make a couple of comments. Canberrans need to be able to depend on the emergency services that the government is there to provide. Indeed, Canberrans see a fee that appears on their rates bill every time it comes around that is supposed to be funding those emergency services. The situations and the scenarios that Ms Morris described in her speech—the real, lived experience of people waiting for ambulances—is not the standard that Canberrans expect and it is not the standard that Canberrans should have to expect. I cannot imagine what it would be like as an elderly person, having fallen, to have to lie in an ant’s nest for hours while you wait for an ambulance to turn up. I cannot imagine what it would be like in any of the scenarios that Ms Morris described.

Our ambulance offices do a fantastic job. I have had to depend on them myself. The work and the efforts that they bring are of such immense value. We cannot be putting those ambulance officers at risk—psychosocial risks that are associated with overwork and with unreasonable expectations. They already put themselves in harm’s way so often. We have to do better than this.

It would be remis of me not to acknowledge that some of the comments that the minister has already made kind of missed the point. They missed the point that there is a difference between the very lengthy change process that led up to the change of roster and the intentions which accompany that and the practical reality that we are facing with what has happened. There is no denying the data that Ms Morris brings in her motion, because the data is the data, the stats are the stats and the reality is the reality. Our ambulance offices are stretched. They have been stretched for too long, and Canberrans are paying the price.

I am very happy that it seems we will be landing on a good consensus approach. Sometimes you have to get to a point where no-one wins perfectly, but I am glad that this will go through today. With that, I commend the amendment.

Amendment agreed to.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (5.14), by leave: Ms Morris has had to unavoidably leave the chamber for an appointment and has asked me to pass on her sincere apologies.

I think it is important to wrap up with a very key reflection on the minister's speech. As I foreshadowed, the minister seems to have missed the point—and the spin machine seemed to have been in overdrive again for some of her speech. The changes in rostering were absolutely overdue. As we have said, our ambulance officers have been stretched for too long. Our emergency services have been stretched for too long. But what the minister seems to have missed is that there is a difference between good intentions and reality—a difference between changing the roster and making sure that that roster could fully implemented without impacting staff wellbeing and patient safety.

It seems to be the same mistake, the same failure, that the health minister made in failing to foresee potential problems in the Digital Health Record and adequately plan and execute the changes that were needed there. It seems to be the same failure that we saw from the transport minister, who failed to perceive problems and plan for problems in the roll out of MyWay+. It feels like this is somewhat cultural: great intentions, great statements, great posturing around what the government wants to bring, followed by implementation that has not been adequately thought through or perfectly executed.

Canberrans deserve better. We will work to make sure Canberrans get better. When the government fails, we will be there to step in and work across parties to make sure a fix is in place. This is one of those times. It has been fulfilling, I guess, to work across parties in such a positive way—notwithstanding the minister's spin in her speech—so that we can deliver an outcome that results in better staff wellbeing and better patient safety, because those are the things that matter. I commend the motion.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

**Public schools—senior secondary languages courses—
standing order 118AA
Ruling by Speaker**

MR SPEAKER: Members, at the end of question time, Mr Emerson raised a point of

order under standing order 118AA regarding a question that he had asked the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Mr Emerson indicated that the minister had not answered several questions he and Ms Barry had asked, and he asked that I require the minister to provide a written response. Members, having reviewed the transcript and sought advice, I do believe that the minister answered the question and therefore I will not require her to provide a written response.

Papers

Motion to take note of papers

Motion (by **Mr Speaker**) agreed to:

That the papers presented under standing order 211 during presentation of papers in the routine of business today be noted.

Assisted Reproductive Technology Amendment Bill 2025 (No 2)

Debate resumed from 28 October 2025, on motion by **Ms Stephen-Smith**:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi) (5.19): The opposition recognises the need and the urgency which sit behind this bill, and so we will be supporting it today. We know this issue is seriously affecting local families who are relying on these technologies, and so we want to see it resolved as soon as possible. But it is also important to note that this is the second amendment that we have had to make to the Assisted Reproductive Technology Act this year. Both amendments have been necessary because the Minister for Health has botched the original legislation.

First, the minister failed to ensure that appropriate transitional arrangements were in place. This meant that a number of service providers were left in an impossible situation where they would have to stop treatments that were underway at the time the act was legislated or they would potentially face criminal charges. That meant that the Assembly had to urgently agree to amendments earlier this year to ensure that local Canberrans could continue their treatments. It is a pretty remarkable blunder. Yet it soon became clear that it is not the only one.

One of the goals of the act was to ensure that people conceived using these technologies would be able to access information about the donor. The minister described a culture of secrecy around donation that the legislation would resolve. But it is clear now that the minister failed to appropriately consult and consider stakeholder feedback. As service providers have told me, the changes went too far and thus have put off so many donors that it is now impacting the ability of families to access these services. This failure leads us to the bill which is currently before the Assembly, which waters down the act to ensure the industry remains viable. So the act which the minister said would increase confidence in local ART services has managed to threaten the availability of these services for new and existing clients!

The minister, as I said, has completely botched this reform and has placed a lot of

unnecessary stress onto local families. She has threatened the viability of local service providers and has damaged the confidence the health sector has in the ACT government. Rather than accepting responsibility and apologising to the families and businesses affected, the minister has blamed others, which is disappointing but not surprising. Labor may think that this kind of behaviour is acceptable for their ministers, but I believe Canberrans deserves more than they are getting from the health minister and more than they are getting from this Labor government.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (5.21): I rise to speak in support of the amendments to the Assisted Reproductive Technology Act. They are amendments that represent a difficult but ultimately reasonable compromise in the face of the current crisis in donated gamete supply in the ACT. The reality we are confronting is this: the rights of donor-conceived people—rights this Assembly only recently and proudly strengthened—are now being constrained in order to ensure that people who need donor gametes, including LGBTIQ families and single mothers, can access treatment. This is not an outcome anyone in this chamber seeks lightly, but it is the immediate problem before us and it must be addressed with honesty and care.

The amendments limit early parental access to identifying donor information, which actually addresses an inequality between what donor-conceived children and their parents can access. However, amendments also raise the default age at which donor-conceived young people can access identifying information on the donor to 18 rather than 16. It does, however, allow 16- and 17-year-olds access to that information if they have been assessed by a counsellor as capable of understanding donor contact preferences and that the donor has no parental role. These changes have been driven by feedback from ART providers and those attempting to access these services.

Currently, international sperm banks are unable or unwilling to provide gametes, and donors themselves are uncomfortable with the immediacy of information release. As a result, gamete supply in the ACT has dropped to levels so low that it has resulted in people travelling interstate or accessing gametes on the black market, which carries its own risks. For many families—particularly rainbow families, single parents by choice and those facing infertility—this meant that the pathway to forming their families was closing. Our evaluation of the risks versus the benefits of these amendments had to take this factor into account.

At the same time, we must equally acknowledge what advocates for donor-conceived people have reminded us. Secrecy and restrictions around genetic parentage, no matter how temporarily necessary, are fundamentally inconsistent with equity and with how we treat identity information in every other part of Australian life. This compromise cannot be the new normal. We must see this as a short-term fix to address the present supply issue, but we must remember that we have a responsibility to stay firmly committed to long-term transparency and fairness for donor-conceived people, so we must work hard on progressing important practical steps that uphold these rights.

Crucially, these amendments do not eliminate the ability of young people to voluntarily place their own information on the donor register from the age of 16. This provision remains important. It gives donor-conceived teenagers agency and supports the often life-changing ability to connect with half-siblings. Although mandatory counselling will now apply before a 16- or 17-year-old can obtain identifying information about

their donor, they still have access, without barrier, to non-identifying details such as the sex and year of birth of donor siblings. These pieces of information, as we know, often help donor-conceived people locate and connect with one another.

That said, we must truly listen to the donor-conceived community when they tell us that mandatory counselling for 16-year-olds feels patronising. These young people navigate school, employment, health care, relationships and major life decisions with substantial autonomy. Their lived experience must remain central to future reviews of this legislation.

Even as we implement this short-term fix, the government must make several clear commitments. First, we must acknowledge publicly that these limitations on access, while necessary today due to the dire state of donor availability, are not ideal for donor-conceived people. Second, while we appreciate that the ACT is particularly vulnerable to impacts from changes in the law in this area, given our small size and reliance on international donors, that is why there needs to be a more concerted effort from the ART industry to build a stronger pool of local donors. This is the long-term solution to donor scarcity. Relying heavily on international donation leaves us subject to foreign consent processes, foreign privacy laws and external limitations that conflict with Australian standards.

Third, the government must commit to a comprehensive education campaign so that donors, parents, donor-conceived people and ART providers fully understand these new provisions. The better people understand the system the more effectively they can participate in it, and the more likely we are to attract local donors who are comfortable with Australian transparency expectations. And, fourth, we must move swiftly to stage 2, the donor register. It is notable that the ACT government has now had to amend this legislation twice in one year rather than again working on the retrospective part of the ACT's donor register. This stage is essential for donor-conceived people. Other jurisdictions are ahead of us. South Australia's retrospective register is already live. The government should advise as to when the process of setting up and consultation on the retrospective register will start. Donor-conceived people in the ACT deserve this to progress.

Ultimately, we need national cooperation for a national donor register. The stories we have heard of donor-conceived people believing they had all their sibling information from one state, only to discover another cluster of siblings through DNA testing or another state's register, make clear that our current fragmented system is failing families. Interstate and interclinic transfers of gametes have occurred for decades. Only national coordination will properly ensure the safety and wellbeing of donor-conceived people and prevent them from having to piece together their genetic history through consumer DNA tests. I urge the ACT government to continue to collaborate with every other state and territory to advocate to the commonwealth for nationally consistent best-practice legislation and a linked central register.

The amendments before us resolve an immediate problem, but they must not define the future. Let this Assembly commit to a path that is transparent, fair, nationally coordinated and grounded in respect for every person whose life is shaped by donor conception. The Greens support the bill containing these amendments in the Assembly today, but we will continue to advocate strongly for progress on the ACT's retrospective

register and creating a national retrospective register, which will make a big difference to the lives of donor-conceived people.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (5.29), in reply: I rise to close debate on the principle state of this bill and thank Ms Castley and Mr Rattenbury for their contributions. I also take the opportunity to thank the scrutiny committee for its consideration of this bill. It is a challenge when you bring forward an amendment bill for a third time to a bill that you introduced, but it reflects the fact that we have been closely monitoring the implementation of this very complex legislation. The whole space is very complex.

Mr Rattenbury did a good job of outlining the balance of considerations between the rights of donor-conceived people and the importance for people who require assisted reproductive technology to start or complete their families of having access to donor gametes, particularly single mothers by choice and LGBTIQ+ people, but there are many other individuals and families in the community who have difficulty conceiving and require the support of assisted reproductive technology.

The aim of the original bill and act was twofold: to regulate the industry, which had not been done before, and also to provide greater transparency and support to donor-conceived people through the establishment of the register. It has become clear that some provisions in the act had unintended consequences. We worked through a series of amendments in relation to that, and this is the last of those amendments to respond to those particular concerns. ART providers have expressed concern about the early release of identifying information to recipient parents and to donor-conceived individuals under the age of 18 as an automatic provision under the current provisions. There is some evidence that these provisions, while they were well-intentioned, have led to a decline in the availability of donor gametes, because of the way that donors consent in other jurisdictions and the inability to get those consent processes changed for the ACT, which is heavily reliant on international gamete banks that have indicated that they are unable or unwilling to supply donated gametes to the ACT under the current law, particularly in relation to parental access.

I reiterate that this legislation is not the type of legislation that was introduced one week and passed the next. It sat before the Assembly for more than three months. The assisted reproductive technology providers had plenty of opportunity, as did the shadow minister for health, to review the legislation while it was before the Assembly and to express their concerns at that time. They had plenty of opportunity to provide some scrutiny. That is what oppositions are supposed to do with legislation: scrutinise legislation, talk to stakeholders and form an opinion about it. Also, the committee chose not to inquire into the original bill when it was before the Assembly. If any of those things had occurred, some of the challenges would potentially have been drawn to our attention. Unfortunately they were not, in any way by anyone, drawn to attention until some months after the legislation had passed and we were very shortly to go into caretaker mode.

The way that this process played out is very unfortunate. I again reiterate my apology and understanding of the distress that this has caused many individuals in our community who are reliant on assisted reproductive technology.

That said, the officials have done a fantastic job over the last year in getting the detail right around this amendment bill. In particular, I note that Mr Rattenbury touched on the fact that young people aged 16 and 17 will be required to be assessed by a counsellor to access identifying donor information, although they will have access to non-identifying donor information. I want to be clear that this is not about mandatory counselling for those individuals; it is about an assessment of whether those young people are able to understand and will respect the contact wishes of the donor. Donors are, of course, able to indicate that they would be willing to be contacted by a young person who was conceived as a result of their donor gametes being used. That is an important point of clarity.

I also want to touch on Mr Rattenbury's point about national responses and the desirability of a national approach. I agree with Mr Rattenbury that, in an ideal world, we would absolutely have a nationally regulated assisted reproductive technology sector. I am pleased to say that, after some of the recent issues that have arisen in ART over the last year or so, health ministers, at our most recent meeting, agreed to move to national accreditation of assisted reproductive technology, which was previously accredited by a body that was governed by the sector itself. But the move towards national regulation, as Mr Rattenbury talked about, while desirable, would be extremely complex because all jurisdictions are at quite different stages, and even those that are at similar stages in their regulatory response to assisted reproductive technology have legislation drafted in slightly different ways. One of the challenges that our officials experience in trying to draft legislation for a small jurisdiction like the ACT is looking at the different ways that clauses have been drafted in jurisdictions and trying to work through what represented best practice and the most practical ways of doing things to achieve the outcome.

In terms of where we have landed—again going back to the issues of access and clause 8 of the bill, which establishes the two pathways for donor-conceived individuals to access donor information—this approach ensures that access is developmentally appropriate and aligns with the principles set out in the National Health and Medical Research Council's *Ethical guidelines on the use of assisted reproductive technology in clinical practice and research*, which have been the Australian industry standard since 2004.

These amendments reflect a considered and compassionate approach that respects the needs of donor-conceived individuals while recognising the importance of donor privacy and consent. Importantly, the Health and Community Services Directorate officials who developed this legislation undertook targeted consultation with those most affected and considered the views of ART providers, clients, donor-conceived individuals and families. They heard from members of the LGBTIQ+ community and solo parents by choice—groups that are disproportionately reliant on ART access and donor ability to start and grow their families. These reforms reflect a careful human rights analysis aimed at balancing the interests of stakeholders in a fair and respectful way.

I again take full responsibility for the fact that the original legislation did not meet the needs of everybody involved. We did our best, and officials did their best, to balance all of those considerations. It is a very good example of where really strong Assembly

and legislative scrutiny would have been beneficial. For these complex bills, it is a bit of a lesson that we need to think about encouraging scrutiny in that way through the Assembly, but also, from my side, ensuring that we proactively engage stakeholders when we have legislation before the Assembly, to make sure that they are in a position to look at the way the final legislation is introduced.

With that said, I commend the bill to the Assembly.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Bill agreed to in principle.

Leave granted to dispense with the detail stage.

Bill agreed to.

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee Scrutiny report 13

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (5.39), by leave: I present:

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee (Legislative Scrutiny Role)—Scrutiny Report 13, dated 25 November 2025, together with a corrigendum to report 13 and extracts of the relevant minutes of proceedings.

I seek leave to make a brief statement.

Leave granted.

MS BARRY: *Scrutiny report 13* contains the committee's comments on six bills, six pieces of subordinate legislation, proposed amendments to three bills, two government responses and one response to subordinate legislation. The report was circulated to members when the Assembly was not sitting. I commend the report to the Assembly.

Statements by members Noise pollution—roosters

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (5.40): Thank you, Mr Speaker; perhaps get used to calling me up for these!

I want to raise an issue that is affecting far more residents than many realise, which is the growing problem of uncontrolled rooster noise in some Ginninderra suburbs. Across Canberra, roosters are crowing from as early as 4 am, disturbing families, shiftworkers, parents with young children, and older residents. What should be a quiet, peaceful neighbourhood environment has become a daily source of distress for many. This is not just an inconvenience. Residents are reporting disrupted sleep, increased anxiety and cumulative mental health impacts. People are exhausted, they are frustrated and they feel completely abandoned by a system that does not work for them.

Residents have followed the steps available to them—lodging complaints, contacting

rangers and speaking to agencies—but very seldom do situations change. The current system is slow, inconsistent and ultimately ineffective. The government has set rules around animal noise yet provides no real enforcement or timely support. I urge the government and the minister to immediately review and strengthen their approach. It is unacceptable that people are left suffering because the government refuses to find better solutions. People deserve rest, peace and confidence that their government will step in when their wellbeing is at risk.

World AIDS Day

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (5.41): Yesterday I attended Meridian’s event to commemorate World AIDS Day. On 1 December each year we pause to reflect on the progress we have made in our response to HIV. We remember those who have lost to HIV AIDS, we stand with those living with HIV today, and we reaffirm our commitment to a future free of stigma and discrimination. This year’s theme, “No-one left behind,” is more than a slogan; it is a responsibility. Nearly 31,000 people in Australia are living with HIV and, while we have seen a steady decline in new HIV notifications over the past decade, we know this progress did not happen by chance. It is the result of community work, peer education, government-led harm reduction measures and the principle of treatment as prevention.

But our work is not done. The research, care, treatment and prevention currently in place give us hope for the future. We are progressing in a positive direction. However, we must ensure that no one is left behind, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Stigma and discrimination remain barriers that we cannot ignore. I wish to thank Meridian for their beautiful event and for the important work that they do supporting communities with HIV and AIDS every day. I look forward to the next stage of their peer-led work.

Australian National University—School of Music

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (5.43): I want to speak briefly to support the ANU’s decision, as reported in media today, to walk back from its proposed cuts to music and humanities. This means no changes to the School of Music. The School of Music has been iconic, bringing musicians from all over Australia and the world here into the ACT and helping enrich the culture, skills, talent and musical community in Canberra.

Art and music are powerful. They record and reflect the world as we know it. They shape the world that we want and help us make sense of what is going on. music in particular brings people together. It is something that people share and experience collectively. It is welcoming and it is, at its core, emotionally validating.

The ACT Greens view tertiary education as a public good, and arts education in particular as a public good, as the foundation to develop the skills and expertise needed for our collective futures. We are really, really pleased to see this decision has been walked back. A lot of damage has been done to the reputation of the ANU. Today’s news is a good outcome, and we are hoping they can repair some of that damage. To prevent causing this distress across the community, we need the federal government to put people first and to properly fund our universities so they are affordable and

accessible for every Canberran and so that our universities do not make decisions like this again.

Speaker—appointment

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (5.44): Mr Speaker, I wish to congratulate you on a personal level for your elevation to the speakership today. I also want to state publicly that you have my full support, as Deputy Speaker. I look forward to supporting you as we work together to make this place the best parliament that it can be in the service of the Canberra community.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr Braddock. The best speech he has made in this place without a doubt! If I may take the indulgence from the Chair, I also note, Mr Braddock: I thank you for not putting your hand up today. You would have had the numbers and you have decided to stay where you are, which is a great commitment. I also look forward to working with you. Thank you.

World AIDS Day

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (5.45): Yesterday, on Monday 1 December I joined with Minister Stephen-Smith and fellow Canberrans to also commemorate World AIDS Day in the beautiful AIDS Garden of Reflection at the National Arboretum, welcomed by the wonderful team from Meridian, a community-controlled peer-led organisation that provides health and social support services here in the ACT.

Since 1988, World AIDS Day has been held annually on 1 December as a chance for the community to show their support for people living with HIV; raise awareness about prevention, treatment and care; combat stigma and discrimination; and remember people who have died from AIDS related illnesses. This year's theme, "No-one left behind," underscores the urgent need to tackle inequalities in HIV prevention, testing, treatment and quality of life. It calls for better access and improved outcomes for First Nations peoples, cultural and linguistically diverse communities and those living in regional or remote areas.

As we heard from Meridian yesterday, in recent years Papua New Guinea and other parts of the Pacific have been facing a huge increase in the number of HIV cases diagnosed. And that is our backyard. When we say no-one left behind, we should include our whole region of the world in that when we talk about it. So thank you to the team at Meridian, including the CEO, Joshua Anlezark, and President, David Momcilovic, for putting on such a lovely event and for the work Meridian and other organisations such as Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT, Hepatitis ACT and all others do for our community.

Adjournment

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Chisholm Vikings Club—closure

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (5.47): This afternoon I rise to acknowledge something that should concern every member of this Assembly—government, opposition and crossbench alike—and that is the impending closure of the Chisholm Vikings Club. This is not just another business shutting its doors; it is not a failed pub or a cafe that could not find enough customers. This is a community anchor—36 years of sport, family gatherings, charity events, local jobs and social connection—being forced to close because the policy settings of this government have made it impossible to survive.

Vikings have been very clear that their operating environment is—and I will quote directly—“increasingly challenging, with evolving government policy, social expectations and rising costs”. This is not opposition spin; this is from their own public statement, and we all know it is true. The ACT has created the most punitive, restrictive and inconsistent policy landscape for community clubs across Australia.

This government tells clubs to diversify, invest in new revenue streams and build community facilities, but then it hits them with lease variation charges that treat not-for-profits like profit-maximising developers. This government tells them to redevelop land but then makes the planning system so complex and expensive that diversification just becomes a fantasy. This government deliberately shrinks their gaming revenue through policy choices and then refuses to provide the transition funding needed to replace it, and Chisholm is the result. It is not because of a bad board, a lack of effort or a lack of community support. It is the first major casualty of a policy framework that this government has been warned about for a decade.

Let us be honest: when a club closes, gambling does not stop. It just shifts online or it shifts across the border to Queanbeyan—higher risk, less safe, less regulated environments. If the government thinks it is harm minimisation, it is kidding itself; it is actually harm displacement. What we lose is a supervised venue, a community meeting place, a sponsor of junior sport, a source of local jobs and one of the last remaining pillars of social cohesion in some suburbs.

I say this to the government: Chisholm is the canary in the coalmine. The worst part is that it did not have to happen. We, the opposition, told you this was coming. ClubsACT certainly told you. In 2015, they told you that venues would close if you did not reform LVC, if you did not modernise legislation, if you did not harmonise with New South Wales, and if you did not support genuine diversification. Those warnings were ignored.

This inquiry into the clubs industry, this last-chance review, must not become another report that gathers dust, because without change there will be more closures. There will be more jobs lost, more sporting teams forced to fundraise or just disband, and more community infrastructure gone forever.

The Canberra Liberals believe that clubs are not a nuisance to be managed; they are a community asset to be supported. We believe in a partnership model, not a punishment model. We believe in practical harm minimisation, not theatre. We believe that if the government continues down this path, the cost will be borne not by politicians but by the families, communities and workers who rely on these venues.

This afternoon I call on the government to treat Chisholm not as a footnote but as a turning point, because if we fail to act now, we will not just lose one club. Mark my words: you will not just lose one club; you will lose quite a number. We face losing the entire network that has kept Canberra's suburbs connected for generations.

Children and young people—paediatric Crohn's disease

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (5.51): Recently, I met Sarah—who is in the public gallery today—at the Mawson shops on a Saturday morning. She described to me her very personal battle for her children, who suffer from paediatric Crohn's disease. Her advocacy has alerted me to the obstacles that our healthcare system poses to children suffering from this disease, and I want to take this opportunity to alert this Assembly to what needs to change.

Current PBS criteria significantly delay timely access to the most effective treatment for young patients, whose disease is often aggressive, debilitating and associated with lifelong health consequences. Paediatric Crohn's disease differs in important ways from adult-onset disease. Children frequently present with more severe inflammation, rapid progression, and complications such as growth failure, delayed puberty, nutritional deficits and irreversible intestinal damage.

Early and effective control of inflammation is widely recognised as critical for preventing longer term disability. That is why international guidelines for treatment of paediatric Crohn's disease recommend that biological medicines be used early to treat severe or high-risk cases. Yet the PBS requirements—particularly step therapy mandates, rigid failure criteria and restrictive definitions of severe disease—do not align with the urgency of paediatric care. It means that children who need this treatment in Australia have to wait much longer for it than children in other OECD countries. It also means that, in practice, treatment for paediatric Crohn's disease in Australia does not meet international best practice guidelines.

Leading paediatric gastroenterologists consistently report that delays in accessing biological treatments result in prolonged corticosteroid exposure, hospitalisations and avoidable surgical interventions. Beyond the immediate health impacts, these delays affect schooling, social development, mental health and family wellbeing. By the time children meet the current PBS thresholds, the chance to make a significant improvement in the disease trajectory is often lost. This results in lifelong consequences for those children.

Widening the PBS criteria, such as allowing paediatric specialists to initiate biologics earlier based on evidence of high-risk disease, recognising the different course of the disease in children, and reducing burdensome administrative requirements would support best-practice, evidence-based care. Improving timely access should also be a health priority, as it relates to preventive health, equity and reducing long-term costs to the health system. Early effective treatment would reduce acute-care episodes, decrease reliance on steroids and prevent surgeries that are far more expensive, invasive and traumatic.

Sarah and other parents with children affected by this condition are seeking, as a matter

of priority, a review of the current PBS listings for biological therapies used in paediatric Crohn's disease, in consultation with paediatric gastroenterologists, families and patient advocacy organisations. Updating the criteria so that treatment of this disease in Australia can align with international guidelines will make a big difference to the lives of affected children and their families, and that is the bottom line here. I have spoken a lot about the details, the symptoms and the consequences, but the human story is what this is really all about.

A change in the PBS listing is an opportunity to make a real difference for the affected young people and also to assist the parents, who right now have to live with not only the anguish of watching their children experience terrible consequences, but also the anguish of knowing better outcomes are available, but not accessible for their children in Australia.

Australia needs to catch up with the rest of the OECD, and we need to do it as soon as possible. At a national level, there need to be changes to the PBS. I also ask the health minister to use her advocacy opportunities to make the case and put this on the radar so that we might see quick progress on a change in this space.

Canberra Region Tourism Awards

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (5.56): Two Fridays ago, on 21 November, the Canberra Region Tourism Awards were held. The industry is growing and offering more events and experiences than ever before. The diversity of tourism offerings in our regional tourism economy was recognised and celebrated at the awards.

I am pleased to advise the Assembly that Floriade cemented its status as Canberra's premier event, again winning the Major Festivals and Events category. But in a significant moment for the event, it has also broken into the top five tourism events in Australia in this year's Australian event awards.

Our world-class wine region was also celebrated, with Shaw Estate winning the New Tourism Business category, and Wine Hopper was highly commended in that category. The Canberra and Region Visitors Centre has again been recognised under the Visitor Information category, and particularly, in part, for its Canberra Cellar Door initiative. The tourism industry continues to innovate and highlight the best of Canberra to national and international audiences.

I would like to commend the Canberra Region Tourism Industry Council for their leadership in delivering a program that unites the industry and celebrates its achievements. In particular, I acknowledge Questacon, as the winner of the Major Tourist Attraction, with the National Museum of Australia highly commended, and the National Zoo and Aquarium commended in that category. The Canberra Reptile Zoo was the winner of the Tourist Attractions category, with a commendation for the National Dinosaur Museum.

Major Festivals and Events was won by Floriade, with a commendation for the National Capital Authority's FLIGHT drone show. Our friends just across the border in Murrumbateman, with the Murrumbateman Field Days, won the Festivals and Events

category, with the Canberra Festival of Speed at Thoroughbred Park receiving a commendation in that category. The Royal Australian Mint was the winner of the Cultural Tourism category, with the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House highly commended.

Our friends at POP Canberra, on the excellent Lonsdale Street in Braddon, won the Tourism, Retail and Hire Services category, with Murrumbateman Chocolate Company being highly commended in that category. In Visitor Information Services, there was the Canberra Region Visitors Centre, as I have mentioned. Hotel Realm won the Business Event Venues category. Alivio Tourist Park won, in the Caravan and Holiday Parks category. Jamala Wildlife Lodge was the clear winner in the Unique Accommodation category.

The Y Leumeah Lodge won the 3-3.5 Star Accommodation category. The Midnight Hotel Autograph Collection by Marriott was the winner of the 4-4.5 Star Deluxe Accommodation category. Hotel Realm won the Five Star category. Shaw Estate won, in the New Tourism Business category. Excellence in Food Tourism was won by the Murrumbateman Chocolate Company.

Congratulations to all the winners. I wish them all the very best. They will go on to represent the Canberra region at the Australian Tourism Awards, which will be held in Fremantle, I believe in the old Fremantle jail, in early March next year. Again, thank you to those who organised the awards. It was a great pleasure to gather with several hundred of our tourism industry leaders. I think I am coming into my 20th year as tourism minister. It is one of my favourite areas of economic activity, as would be clear by that duration as minister. It is always wonderful to be able to celebrate the businesses and people behind our tourism and hospitality industry that make our place such a fantastic place to both visit and live in. Congratulations to all the tourism operators.

Children and young people—youth mental health

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (6.00): I rise today to share a speech written by Sophie Kelly, a year 10 student from St Francis Xavier College in Florey, who completed her work experience placement in my office last week. Throughout the week, Sophie worked closely with my team, learning about parliamentary processes, developing her research and communication skills, and ultimately writing the speech that I am about to present. She chose to focus on an issue that is deeply important to her and to many young people across Australia—the youth mental health crisis. These are the words of Ms Kelly:

Going through school and adolescence while struggling with your own mental health is an experience like nothing else. A feeling of complete isolation, struggling to keep yourself alive while being told that you need to put more effort into schoolwork and get better grades. Seeing your friends and classmates appear to thrive while you go home exhausted every day.

The doubt that you will be able to survive. The constant question of if it is even worth it. You realise you aren't the same as everyone around you. You can't do the things that others seem to find so easy, but as a kid, you don't have the words to describe it. There is no way to explain how you feel, how much you are struggling. You don't know how to ask for help, or even what it is that is wrong. You are stuck, sinking, while you are meant to be learning how to live, while everyone else seems to float. It makes

you feel like an alien, completely alone, lost and confused.

Mental health is not a taboo topic. It is not something that can be ignored or forgotten about. It is an everyday part of life. Everyone will be affected by mental health in one way or another, whether it is through their own struggles or someone around them. Mental health needs to become part of everyday conversation. Waiting for it to just go away won't work, and the rate at which mental health issues and disorders are increasing proves that it's only getting worse.

Schools, parents, healthcare professionals and the government need to work together with youth to find the best way forward. As a society, we must work together to destigmatise the topic of mental health and ensure everyone is educated. Education on mental health should be integrated into the school curriculum and teachers should be trained on how to help those struggling with mental health. If we never talk about it, how are those struggling with mental health meant to know that they aren't alone?

If no-one else mentions it, how are teams meant to recognise that there is help available? No-one should be forced to carry that weight by themselves. No-one should have to struggle alone.

Australia's system for mental health care is extremely complicated and inaccessible for many. Those seeking help are met with long waiting lists, a shortage of mental health professionals, expensive and, for many, unaffordable care. More needs to be invested into the system to ensure that everyone can get the help they deserve.

Through creating more online or youth-run mental health hubs, training more mental health professionals, conducting more research into mental health, and finding a way to reduce the cost of care, we can create a system that works for everyone. It is hard enough for people to ask for help. It should not even be harder to receive that help. It is imperative that our approach to mental health changes so that future generations can live in a world where they can feel safe and happy.

Teenagers should not have to live in a world where they struggle through each day, where waking up in the morning feels too hard or where they are too embarrassed to ask for help. We need to teach everyone that asking for help is okay and they are not alone. Resolving the current mental health crisis is not just a responsibility for those who are struggling, it is a responsibility for all Australians. The youth are Australia's future, and they deserve to live a life that they can actually enjoy.

Those are the words of Ms Sophie Kelly, a year 10 student—very thought provoking. I hope we are all impressed and touched by her commitment and her courage in sharing her experiences.

Diabetes—Kellion Victory Medals
Mr Michael Lee OAM
Valedictory

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (6.05): I rise in this adjournment debate to remark upon the serious honour I had a couple of weeks ago in my first event as a Diabetes Australia Blue Circle Collective community ambassador, helping to present the 2025 Diabetes Australia Kellion Victory Medals to seven remarkable ACT citizens.

Kellion Victory Medals honour members of our community who have lived with

diabetes for 50 years or more, as well as their partners, families and friends who have supported them. I was able to offer my respect and congratulations to Joanna Hodge, Louise Lamb, Sharon Hurlstone and Suzanne Thompson for their silver 50 years medals, to Helen Fallow and Jeffrey McKenzie for their gold 60 years medals, and to Gary Meades, who was diagnosed 70 years ago, for his platinum Kellion medal. Not only was it fabulous to feel so seen in a room where everyone laughed at everyone else's inside diabetes jokes, but it was a privilege to share in this moment of recognition and gratitude for some extraordinary journeys.

I also have the privilege today of being able to pay a small tribute to one of the greats of education in Canberra, and a drive-in, drive-out Tuggeranong icon, Mr Michael Lee OAM. Michael will step down at the end of this year as principal of Tuggeranong's St Mary MacKillop College after 18 years of extraordinary service. When Michael speaks, people listen, because every word, often emotionally delivered, matters. Michael's commitment is deep because he cares about his students, his staff and the values that bring a community together.

Michael has been more than a principal. He has been a mentor, a role model and a friend to many. He has had a culture of fairness and inclusion for all at St Mary MacKillop College, and he has done it with energy, integrity and a sense of purpose that inspires thousands of young people. On behalf of the Brindabella community and this Assembly, I want to say thank you, Michael, and congratulations on an exceptional career of leadership and passion that has made our community what it is today.

Finally, a year into this role, I have four words for the good burghers of Brindabella who elected me as one of their champions in this place. Thank you very much. The honour and privilege of doing my best to get actions, answers and outcomes for Tuggeranong is the most interesting, motivating and engaging job I will ever have. The fact that it has enabled me to contribute to discussions about policies for promoting and strengthening the educational possibilities of Tuggeranong's public schools, for advancing and broadening access to good public health care in Tuggeranong, supporting increasing participation in community sports and arts organisations, and helping to deliver little and big wins for our community still gives me real "watcher of the skies when a new planet" vibes.

That said, the finest part of this role is meeting neighbours and fellow citizens for thoughtful exchanges and interesting, sometimes provocative, insights. I have had a wonderful year of continuous conversations in Tuggeranong, and I am looking forward to plenty more.

I am also looking forward to another year of working with and within some first-rate teams. While, in 2026, there will be no respite for my brilliant colleagues in the Labor caucus from my endless, best-intentions sleeve plucking, I am very grateful to each one of you for your camaraderie, advice, support and patience so far. Thank you, Caitlin. I have really enjoyed this year. You are a Brindabella legend.

Because I have already shared or I am sharing at least one committee with all 15 other non-executive members, I thank you for your collegiality and originality. A special shout-out to my fellow Isle of Man survivor. To OLA staff, from Clerk's office to HR and the secretariat, words fail my admiration and gratitude for your efforts and

professionalism.

Cathy, Ben and Jacob won my campaign in 2024. In 2025, they have become the nonpareil of a supportive, effective, argumentative—in a necessary, non-echo-chamber way—and dynamic political office. The best decision I have made in this role was asking them if they would let me stand on their giant shoulders. For Jacob, happily, that description is both physical and metaphorical. We have planted many trees already, team, but there are plenty more that need shaking.

As they were last year, Cesc, Henson and Octavia remain the best of me. I do not have too many tickets on myself, Mr Speaker, but I can assure the Assembly that I am handling the reality that Cesc is now taller than me pretty maturely. Libby is still and always the best. Thank you one, thank you all. I wish everyone, everywhere, happy everything.

Schools—demountable classrooms

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (6.10): I rise today to give this speech on behalf of Bonnie, who was our excellent work experience student from Narrabundah last week. It is about demountables, which is an issue that is, I believe, quite dear to her heart. Bonnie writes:

Honourable members, across the ACT's 92 public schools, over 100 temporary demountable classrooms are being used to expand school capacity and to respond to fluctuations in enrolments. These classrooms have been marketed as temporary, flexible and cost-effective ways to support our schools. However, concerns have been raised by parents, students, staff and community members alike regarding the use of these demountables, ranging from the lack of investment in permanent infrastructure to the spatial inefficiencies of the classrooms.

I stand here today to draw attention to the issues posed by these demountable classrooms, most notably how the prolonged and widespread use of these classrooms can have significant impacts on school ovals, play areas and green spaces, all of which are vital to the overall learning environment. I further wish to call for a re-evaluation of our approach in deploying these demountables. Firstly, what exactly are demountable classrooms?

Well, demountable classrooms are educational spaces which are portable, are quick to install and typically more affordable than permanent infrastructure. They are used throughout the ACT and are most often deployed to address rapid enrolment fluctuations or during extended construction periods in schools.

Across the territory, over 37 public schools are currently using demountable classrooms to support the learning of their student populations. In many cases, these classrooms have been marketed as “temporary fixtures” in schools. However, some have been used and in use for periods upwards of 40 years. Furthermore, several ACT schools are heavily reliant on these classrooms, employing more than seven or eight demountable buildings, sometimes containing multiple classrooms apiece. Now, these classrooms can vary widely in age, size, construction quality and adjoining facilities, particularly when compared to permanent infrastructure.

However, spatial efficiency is a concern for all, as most demountables are not multistorey, nor do they make use of shared areas such as corridors. This impacts the

availability of green and outdoor spaces in schools, as the demountables are often placed in these areas. Additionally, the use of these classrooms is only expected to increase over the coming years, and we must understand their impacts on students' entire learning environment.

Now, moving on to looking at the tangible impacts on students. Over more recent years, the impacts of demountable classrooms in our schools have begun to be recognised in terms of taking over outdoor spaces as well as quality concerns, with the rooms often being viewed as second-class spaces. Demountable classrooms are typically installed in green spaces, on ovals or in play areas, impacting students' ability to play and do sporting activities.

Concerns regarding the prolonged and widespread use of demountable classrooms have been raised repeatedly by schools across Canberra, from Garran to Majura to Mawson and more. These schools have advocated for demountable classrooms to only be used as temporary substitutes and not a solution for growing enrolments with regards to the use of these classrooms at some schools for decades.

For example, student capacity concerns were first raised at Garran Primary School close to a decade ago—

And when I was there, actually—

after receiving their first demountable classroom in 2003. They went on to have a sea of seven other demountables added over the years to expand the school. These demountables took over significant portions of outdoor and playground space, and even today, despite the ongoing development, students still lack their full green space.

Additionally, the Majura Primary P&C raised in a submission that despite their two demountables, it is a continued effort to protect the school's specialist learning spaces from being forced to host general classes. They further flagged how the demountables on campus have been unable to fully address their capacity issues and that the other solutions need to be explored.

In a similar situation, Mawson Primary School's own P&C has described how their three demountable buildings have taken over various sports areas and that they are facing capacity challenges in other spaces such as the school hall which can no longer accommodate the entire student body. Furthermore, at Narrabundah College their village of 22 demountable classrooms has taken over the school's oval since 2018. This has severely hampered the sports culture at the school and impacted several cohorts of students.

Look, it's not a novel idea that green and outdoor spaces positively influence learning, but it is one we must bring back into focus as we look towards the future of public education in the ACT. Studies performed by the University of Canberra have highlighted the importance of effective schoolyard spaces and the need to prioritise these open spaces as not just a luxury but as an essential for good student health and wellbeing.

Watch this space for part 2.

Racism

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (6.15): I rise today to call out the hateful flyers that were

recently distributed in Greenway. I understand that this is the second time in two months that these flyers have been found in Canberra letterboxes. This behaviour is not acceptable in our community. I acknowledge the individual who stopped the man in Greenway recently and called him out for his behaviour. Just a few months ago, here in the Assembly, we called out racism and anti-immigration sentiment. It is important we continue to do so and that it is not just a one-off occurrence.

Australia is a vibrant and amazing place because we have a rich tapestry of cultures, languages, food and people. We are not one homogenous group. Recently, Miss Nuttall and I did a citizenship ceremony together. I have to say that one of the most beautiful aspects of this job is taking part in citizenship ceremonies and being part of the lives of new Australians. What I always say when I take part in these ceremonies is: “Australia welcomes you for who you are. You are welcome here because of who you are. Treasure your language, treasure your culture, treasure your family and be proud of who you are.”

We must defend, support and recognise that our diversity is our superpower that drives progress here in Australia; it is not holding us back. So, to those in our community delivering the racist flyers, targeting multicultural and faith groups with hate and marching with neo-Nazis: stop it; you are in the minority in this community. To those who are being targeted and are feeling hurt and scared, I am sorry, but you are welcome here. The Assembly says you are welcome here and Australia says you are welcome here. You make Australia the place it is for all of us.

Most of us in Australia have come to here through immigration at some point in our or our family’s history. We cannot just say no to immigration; it is who we are as a country and it is who we are as a people. I want to put my support out there for anyone who is feeling hurt by what has happened with these flyers and other behaviour that is happening in our community and let people know they are not alone.

Valedictory

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (6.18): Like many, I have both hope and fear for what the future holds, and that leads to a lot of work for a better course than the one we are on. This year I drew the Greens’ annual report because we covered too much for words. It came out like a crazy watercolour dream, not unlike the picture on my car—with apologies to Paul Summerfield. Paul, your art is obviously much better than mine. I cannot put a picture on the *Hansard*, so I will talk through a few of the Clay office highlights.

We tried to get answers on why the ACT government missed our legislated climate targets, where our next Climate Change Strategy is, and why nature funding is so manifestly inadequate. We spoke up for the basic food waste recycling services other councils have that would help the climate. We asked for the recycling and product stewardship services that Canberrans need and expect. The minister’s binary framing on climate—that she could either panic or stop action altogether—is concerning. There is a third choice, and it is the choice most people make in an emergency: act quickly and calmly, and direct your resources towards the crisis. Federal Labor agreed to a road through dragon habitat, and we are devastated. This decision might make our dragons extinct, but we will at least get some answers from the commissioner.

We are delighted that we secured Labor's commitment to set city limits and protect the Western Edge and Blewitt's Block, and we look forward to working on the detail with Labor next year. We led amendments and got agreement to streamline public and community housing funding and approvals, along with new environmental and First Nations cultural protections. It is not easy for Labor and the Greens to agree on development, and I am really glad that we can have constructive discussions and get good results when we try.

We looked after animals, including speaking out for a virtual fencing trial to reduce vehicle and wildlife collisions, and we gave ongoing voice to the majority of Canberrans who do not want to waste public funds and key areas of land to prop up the dying horseracing industry. We looked hard at budget decisions. The ACT is missing out on a lot of commonwealth funding, and we spend more on buildings than on the people inside them. I was pleased we got halfway on delivering an increase to the arts budget and on our big corporations tax, and that we reduced the regressive health levy.

We worked with a lot of individual constituents on their frustrations with government services, and we progressed many Belconnen issues. With Laura Nuttall's leadership, we saved SDN Bluebell and got air conditioning for Canberra High. We also spoke out for Big Splash, Ginninderra Falls, the Hawker College bus, and shared paths. We will deliver some wins, but the path is as long and fractured as the West Belco bike path.

People do not choose to work for the Greens for fame or fortune; they do it to make the world a better place, and they put everything they have into that goal. I thank my staff for their hard work. Thank you, Aileen, for your creative, strategic genius and deep knowledge and understanding of Belconnen. Thank you, Julia, for your skills and puppet mastery. Thank you, Peter, for being our voice of conscience and for doing so with such endless good cheer. Thank you, Alia, for your commitment to our climate and environment, both of which are so under attack. Thank you, Neha, for your excellent organising and dry commentary. And thank you, Guy, for your wise counsel and endless optimism.

I am chair of the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning, and our secretariat have a heavy workload, with nine inquiries so far this term. Some were particularly intense, like the one for MyWay+. I thank James, Nicola, Justice and Lydia for their commitment. We have an incredible team of volunteers in the Ginninderra Greens, who work tirelessly to make Canberra and Belconnen a better place. I particularly thank the team leaders: Chris, Ben, Maxine, Penny, Joe, Fiona, Danny and Finley. I also thank my colleagues and everyone in the Greens, the climate and the environment movements. It is a hard place to be in the age of consequences. Thank you for doing what you can. Hope beats the alternative.

And I thank my partner, Rob, and my child, Xander. I have given up a lot for this role, but you have given up more. Rob and I recently celebrated our 20-year anniversary, and I took 24 hours out of the cycle to celebrate, but it is not easy to get my undivided attention these days. Xander, watching you grow up and learn about the world is the single biggest source of joy and pride that I have.

Valedictory

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (6.23): As we come to the end of the year, tis the season to not just eat, drink and be merry but to also reflect on the many things we have to be thankful for, including our gratitude to those around us who make it all worthwhile. I start with the staff in my office: Will, for making me dance far more times than I felt comfortable with over the past year and for encouraging me outside of my comfort zone; Neha, who has the misfortune of having not just one MLA to organise but three of us, for the fantastic job she has done with aplomb to keep us on track and where we need to be; Jess, for her lovely dry humour, which is delivered in quiet fashion and is really appreciated; Tim, for the verbal sparring as we test ideas, priorities and approaches; Sylvie, for her effervescent personality, which is a great contribution to the workplace and just what is required during a hard sitting day; and Cody, for returning to the Assembly and giving our office that extra oomph when it comes to climate matters. As an office, it has felt that we have settled in and found our groove.

Over the past year, we have done things like hold the government to account, whether it be about libraries, MyWay+ or caretaker conventions; advanced ideas, including climate adaptation, artificial grass, and free public transport fares for certain community groups; supported community groups with their campaigns, whether it be about the Palestine community, Molonglo busways or bike storage in the Gungahlin town centre; and introduced legislation to improve transparency—for example, on executive records and government advertising campaigns. As well, there has been the usual spread of local constituent matters that are the bread and butter of any member here in the Assembly. To all Greens staff across all of the offices in the Assembly, thank you for your work to progress our agenda. Your advice, guidance, humour and passion are all welcome.

I want to take an unusual step for a Greens MLA and thank a Liberal staff member, Elyse Heslehurst. I hope I have not put the kiss of death on her future career by doing so, but I would like to express my public gratitude for her help whilst I was Acting Speaker and for keeping everything moving, even while everything was changing in her role.

To the Greens Yerrabi team, in particular Willie, James, Jasmine, Eleanor and Greg: I appreciate all of your efforts, and that extends to the many volunteers that make up the political party. Our movement is far more than just the four individuals in this chamber and it requires so many contributions, great and small, from so many people. I also thank our party director, Philippa, for her quiet determination, professionalism and contributions.

I thank the OLA staff for all of their efforts over the year: Hansard, with their ever-constant requests for my speaking points; the Library, who I keep pressuring to make the Assembly's information holdings much more accessible; HR, who have handled numerous questions for me and will continue to do so; Committee Support, for all of their help as we navigate the various issues and challenges; the Education team for their valuable work in engaging with the community to learn more about how democracy here works for them; and Chamber Support, who have dealt with a very different dynamic in this Assembly with aplomb. I recognise there are many more elements of OLA behind the scenes who are the unsung heroes. I really appreciate their work. To each and every one, I express my sincere appreciation of their efforts and wish

them a relaxing break. I look forward to working with them in what promises to be an even more interesting year in 2026.

Valedictory

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (6.26): I thank all who have already given their adjournment speeches for giving me enough time to finish writing mine! Following on from Mr Rattenbury's contribution, I also wish to acknowledge Sarah, who was here in the chamber and who I met recently at SouthFest. We had a longish conversation at the time about paediatric Crohn's disease and her advocacy for evidence based biologics as a first-line treatment. I can assure Sarah that I will indeed raise this with Minister Butler when we meet for the Health Ministers' Meeting next week.

It is somewhat of a tradition to use end-of-year speeches to acknowledge the life challenges we each face and remind one another that we are human after all. I mentioned in a hearing last week that last month marked 10 years since my partner, Michael, took his own life. While I do not speak about him very much, I think about him almost every day and I live with that experience every day. Next week will also mark one year since my father, Ben, died. I spoke earlier this year about his contribution to the Canberra community. Ben held me up through the aftermath of Michael's death and was one of my most committed volunteers through my three election campaigns so far as a candidate, and spent a lot of time looking after my horses when I could not get to them. Last month also marks a decade since I was pre-selected to run as an ACT Labor candidate in Kurrajong. Suffice to say, the last decade has at times been somewhat tumultuous.

No matter your experience or background, campaigning is hard, and becoming an MLA and a minister is a steep learning curve. Being a minister is, as Mr Parton recognised this morning, a big and often frustrating job. You never achieve everything you would like, there is always more to do, and it never ceases to surprise me what comes across my desk from time to time. But I am pleased to say that I am finishing this year—fingers crossed—in a good place. Partly, that is due to the intervention of my new GP, who agreed that treating the symptoms of high stress and anxiety rather than addressing the underlying cause was a perfectly legitimate approach in my situation. The menopause hormone treatment also helps. But it is also due to the incredible support I get in different ways from my family, friends, staff, colleagues and the public servants in the directorates I work with.

It has been another busy year. Nine pieces of legislation have been introduced, passed or commenced in my portfolio, so I am told. Canberra Health Services has done incredible work. I understand we are set to have the best ED performance in the country on a number of measures for 2024-25, and that has already been confirmed in relation to mental health presentations. But they are far from the only ones doing great work in the ACT public service. Yet again, my team has put together a long list of achievements that would take two adjournments to get through, but this is the stuff of ministerial statements.

Today is a day for thankyou's. I start with the Office of the Legislative Assembly, and

particularly the attendants who look after us all the time, whether the Assembly is sitting or not, and all those who make this place tick. There are the directors-general and the staff across the directorates. I particularly want to acknowledge the outgoing Director-General and CEO, Dave Peffer, from Canberra Health Services, who has moved to City and Environment; Rebecca Cross at the ACT Health Directorate, who I have worked with for a long time; and Catherine Rule at the Health and Community Services Directorate. And I welcome Kareena Arthy as the incoming Director-General of the Health and Community Services Directorate.

To our DLOs, Chloe, Andrea, Scarlett, Jared, Kylie, Christine, Carolina, Liam, Hayley and Isabel, thank you very much for all the work that you have done. I thank my staff, Sally, Freya, Hannah, Louise, Kahlia, Meg, Jenna, Ben, and Johnny, of course, who I am privileged to have had by my side for almost the whole decade since I was a candidate. I thank my caucus colleagues, whom I am running out of time to name, and party secretaries Ash van Dijk and Caitlin Cook, and the party's office team. I thank ACT Labor members and those with whom I have campaigned, and all of our union comrades, who are so important to the Labor movement. Finally, to the people of Kurrajong, who re-elected me last year, it is a privilege to continue to serve you in this place.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.31 pm

Schedule of amendments

Schedule 1

Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025

Amendments moved by the Chief Minister

1

Clause 2

Page 2, line 6—

omit

the day after its notification day

substitute

1 July 2026

2

Clause 4

Page 3, line 3—

omit clause 4, substitute

4

**State of the service report
New section 5 (2) (aa)**

insert

- (aa) a statement describing the measures taken within the public sector to assist SES members and statutory office-holders to do their jobs in accordance with the closing the gap principle; and

Note See the *Public Sector Management Act 1994*, s 8 (3A) and s 151 (1A).

4A

New section 5 (4)

insert

- (4) In this section:

closing the gap principle—see the *Public Sector Management Act 1994*, section 8 (4).

SES member—see the *Public Sector Management Act 1994*, dictionary.

4B

**Director-general annual report
Section 6 (2)**

substitute

- (2) The report must include—

- (a) a statement describing the measures taken by the administrative unit during the reporting year to respect, protect and promote human rights; and
- (b) a statement describing the measures taken by the administrative unit during the reporting year to implement the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including measures taken—
 - (i) to implement the priority reforms (however described) mentioned in the agreement; and
 - (ii) in response to any recommendations (however described) in any review of progress under the agreement.

4C Public sector body annual report
New section 7 (2A)

insert

- (2A) The report must include a statement describing the measures taken by the public sector body during the reporting year to implement the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including measures taken—
 - (a) to implement the priority reforms (however described) mentioned in the agreement; and
 - (b) in response to any recommendations (however described) in any review of progress under the agreement.

4D Annual report direction
Section 8 (3) (h)

substitute

- (h) for a territory entity annual report—the report to include 1 or both of the following statements:
 - (i) a statement describing the measures taken by the territory entity during the reporting year to respect, protect and promote human rights;
 - (ii) a statement describing the measures taken by the territory entity during the reporting year to implement the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

4E Section 8 (5)

substitute

- (5) The Minister must present to the Legislative Assembly, not later than 6 sitting days after the day an annual report direction is notified under the Legislation Act, copies of each of the following:
 - (a) the direction;
 - (b) if the elected body made a recommendation to the Minister about the proposed annual report direction under section 9 (1B)—the recommendation and the Minister’s response.

**4F Consultation about annual report direction
New section 9 (1A) and (1B)**

before subsection (1), insert

- (1A) Before making an annual report direction under section 8, the Minister must undertake consultation in accordance with this section.
- (1B) The Minister must—
- (a) give the elected body a copy of the proposed annual report direction; and
 - (b) ask the elected body, in writing, for any recommendation about the proposed annual report direction for matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
 - (c) if the elected body makes a recommendation in writing to the Minister—
 - (i) consider the recommendation; and
 - (ii) respond in writing to the elected body about the recommendation, including any revision of the proposed annual report direction because of the recommendation.

4G Section 9 (1)

omit

Before making an annual report direction under section 8,

substitute

After responding to the elected body's recommendation, or if the elected body has not made a recommendation to the Minister within 30 days of being asked,

4H New section 9 (1) (aa)

insert

- (aa) if the elected body made a recommendation to the Minister—give the committee a copy of the recommendation and the Minister's response; and

4I Section 9 (3), new definition of *elected body*

insert

elected body means the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body established under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body Act 2008*, section 7.

4J Dictionary, new definition of *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*

insert

National Agreement on Closing the Gap—

- (a) means the National Agreement on Closing the Gap between the ACT, the Commonwealth, States, the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations that took effect on 27 July 2020, as in force from time to time; and

Note *State* includes the Northern Territory (see Legislation Act, dict, pt 1).

- (b) includes any future agreement mentioned in clause 13 of the agreement.

Note The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is available at www.closingthegap.gov.au.

3

Clause 6

Page 5, line 7—

omit clause 6, substitute

6 New section 8 (3A) and (3B)

insert

- (3A) An SES member must do their job in accordance with the closing the gap principle.

- (3B) Subsection (3A) does not—

- (a) affect the operation of any other Act; or
(b) create or affect any other legal right.

Note Failing to act in a way that is consistent with s (3A) may be misconduct (see s 9 (1) (c) (i) and (3)).

4

Clause 7

Proposed section 8 (4), new definition of *closing the gap principle*

Page 5, line 21—

omit the definition, substitute

closing the gap principle—an SES member does their job in accordance with the *closing the gap principle* if—

- (a) for provisions of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that relate to transformation or governance of government agencies—the SES member implements those provisions of the agreement, including by—
- (i) continually developing and demonstrating their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural capability; and

- (ii) continually developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural capability of their administrative unit and, for the head of service, of the service; and
- (iii) promoting cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
- (iv) working to eliminate institutional racism in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
- (b) for other provisions of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap that relate to the SES member's job—the SES member—
 - (i) implements those provisions of the agreement; or
 - (ii) provides advice to the Minister responsible for the SES member's administrative unit about implementing those provisions of the agreement.

cultural safety—see the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, part 12 (Definitions).

5

Clause 7

Proposed section 8 (4), new definition of ***institutional racism***

Page 6, line 12—

insert

institutional racism, in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, means the inequitable treatment and outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a result of an entity's policies, practices and culture.

6

Proposed new clauses 8 and 9

Page 6, line 24—

insert

8

Public sector standards for public sector member etc **New section 151 (1A)**

insert

- (1A) Section 8 (3A) applies to a statutory office-holder as if they were an SES member.

9

New section 253

insert

253

Review of amendments made by Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Act 2025

- (1) The Minister must review the operation of amendments made by the *Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Act 2025* as soon as practicable after 1 January 2028.

- (2) The Minister must present a report of the review to the Legislative Assembly within 6 months after the review is started.
- (3) This section expires on 30 June 2029.