



DEBATES
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

DAILY HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

24 September 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 **Thursday, 16 October 2025**.

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Wednesday, 24 September 2025

MR SPEAKER (Mr Parton) (10.00): Members:

Dhawura nguna, dhawura Ngunnawal.
Yanggu ngalawiri dhunimanyin Ngunnawalwari dhawurawari.
Nginggada Dindi wanggiraldjinyin.

The words I have just spoken are in the language of the traditional custodians and translate to:

This is Ngunnawal country.
Today we are all meeting on Ngunnawal country.
We always pay respect to Elders, female and male.

Members, I ask you to stand in silence and pray or reflect on our responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory.

Legislative Assembly—standing order 118AA

MR SPEAKER (Mr Parton) (10.01): Members, before we go to petitions this morning, there was a point of order raised during question time yesterday from Miss Nuttall regarding an answer to a supplementary question given by Mr Steel. Miss Nuttall rose on a point of order under standing order 118AA, with the suggestion that the question had not been sufficiently answered.

In reviewing the *Hansard*, I think Miss Nuttall, and potentially I as well, missed the fact that Mr Steel did indeed answer the question, in the kerfuffle that was happening while we were discussing the point of order. In *Hansard*, he says:

The answer is: yes, we have made comments.

I think we both missed it; so, as a consequence, that one is not scoring a goal.

Petition

The following petition was lodged for presentation:

Crime—offences committed while on bail—petition 41-25

By Mr Milligan, from 727 residents:

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

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT): The petition of the undersigned residents of the ACT draws to the attention of the Assembly that repeat offending on bail within the ACT has risen 92 per cent since 2019, with 40 per cent of offenders arrested under ACT Policing's Operation TORIC already being on bail.

The Bail Act 1992 lacks mandatory, evidence-based risk testing, and lacks sufficiently clear grounds to refuse bail for habitual or recidivist offenders, undermining both community safety and public confidence in the ACT's justice system. This summary sets out the key reforms being proposed under the ACT Bail Reform Petition 2025. These measures aim to strengthen risk-based decision making, reduce reoffending, and support vulnerable young people and families.

Repeat offending while on bail in the ACT is rising and undermining community confidence. The Bail Act 1992 currently lacks a mandatory, evidence-based process to identify and manage high risk accused adult or youth individuals, before they are released. We, the community, call for reforms that embed structured risk assessment in every bail decision and strengthen supports and accountability, especially where children and families are involved. Under the present framework, courts may consider offence seriousness and public safety risks, but the Act does not compel them to apply a standardised risk tool. Without a consistent assessment, individuals with extensive offending histories can still receive bail, resulting in additional harm, repeated breaches, and further erosion of public trust.

Current Practice

- Risk assessments are ad hoc; there is no single validated tool across ACT jurisdictions.
- When requested, Youth Justice Services can prepare assessment reports or support packages, but these are not mandatory or uniform.
- Magistrates exercise broad discretion, often without empirical guidance on likelihood of reoffending or threats to community safety.
- Repeat offending and prior bail breaches are not expressly recognised in legislation as grounds to refuse bail, even for serious or escalating behaviour.
- As a result, high-risk accused individuals frequently obtain bail despite multiple prior offences or breaches, producing inconsistent outcomes and preventable harm.

Evidence Snapshot

- Operation TORIC (ACT Policing, 2022 - 2024): 40 % of 500 arrestees were already on bail.
 - ABS (2019- 2024): Breach of bail and related arrests nearly doubled.
 - AIHW (2024): 54 % of supervised youth return to supervision within 12 months.
 - Youth Remand (ACT CJSP): Headcount up 14 % since December 2021.
- Human Rights Compatibility The proposed amendments are compatible with section 18 of the Human Rights Act 2004: they impose the least restrictive measures necessary, guided by validated evidence, and include safeguards for children and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We urge you to champion amendments to the Bail Act 1992 so that structured, evidence based risk assessment becomes standard practice, community safety is prioritised, and young people and families receive the supports needed to stop the cycle of reoffending. Sources: RoGS 2025 (Corrective Services & Youth Justice), AIHW Youth Justice Tables 2023–24, ABS Criminal Courts Data 2019–2024, ACT Inspector of Correctional Services Annual Report 2023–24.

Your petitioners therefore request the Assembly to amend the Bail Act 1992 and

associated regulations to:

1. Make proven repeat offending or a prior breach of bail a legislated ground for refusing bail, with a reverse presumption against bail in such cases;
2. Require ACT courts to apply a validated, structured risk assessment before any decision on bail is made, ensuring consistent and evidence-based risk evaluation across all ACT jurisdictions;
3. Adopt a single ACT-wide Structured Bail Risk Tool and publish anonymised quarterly data on bail decisions, breach rates, and reoffending outcomes to support transparency and continuous improvement;
4. Enable a curfew and GPS-enabled electronic monitoring program as a legislated alternative to custodial remand;
5. Establish a time-limited bail reform task force (six months) to coordinate further legislative modernisation and develop nationally recognised rehabilitation programs that reduce reoffending;
6. Create a tiered, 24/7 Youth Bail Assessment and Support Service to provide immediate access to assessment, crisis accommodation, transport, and alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment supports;
7. Maintain supported bail for first-time, low-risk, or non-violent youth offences, but apply a 'show cause' requirement for serious repeat property or violent offences;
8. Introduce a swift and certain response to a child's first minor breach of bail, including restorative conferencing within 48 hours and immediate implementation of community-based accountability measures; and
9. Mandate participation by both the child and their family in culturally safe, trauma-informed parenting and family support programs for children and young people facing serious or repeat charges, as a condition of supported bail.

These reforms are designed to improve community safety, reduce reoffending, support early intervention and rehabilitation, and uphold the rights of both accused individuals and victims, in accordance with the Human Rights Act 2004 (ACT) and the Children and Young People Act 2008.

Pursuant to standing order 99A, the petition, having at least 500 signatories, was referred to the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs.

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

Ministerial responses

The following responses to petitions have been lodged:

Charles Conder Primary School—parking—petitions 19-25 and 36-25

Ms Berry, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, dated 2 September 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Ms Tough concerning parking at Charles Conder Primary School.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter about petition number E-PET-019-25 and PET-036-25.

The ACT Government is committed to continuing to ensure ACT public schools meet the learning and wellbeing needs of students and staff. This includes travel management, parking and road safety around our schools.

ACT Government implements a range of measures to manage the safety and vehicle movements around school sites. These include regulatory levers such as parking and speeding fines, parking space, speed bump infrastructure and traffic management solutions at schools.

The Education Directorate and City and Environment Directorate work together on traffic management and safety around schools including opportunities. This includes parking and traffic flow.

Guidance is provided to schools. This includes communications and education materials to encourage and support parents and carers to follow traffic management strategies to minimise congestion, promote active travel to and from school, and safe driving and parking around school areas.

Similar to most schools, Charles Conder Primary School experiences high volume traffic at peak times during pick up and drop off periods. During peak times parents and carers sometimes park on nearby land, which is not designated for car parking. Additional carparking spaces at the school would provide more spaces to park, but is unlikely to reduce congestion at peak times.

Parking Operations, Access Canberra is responsible for dealing with illegal parking. On occasion, schools request support to deter unsafe parking via regulatory enforcement.

The School Safety Program of City and Environment Directorate and Charles Conder Primary School have developed and shared with parents and carers, part-way drop-off and pick-up maps to assist parents and children with planning their routes to and from school.

There is a range of publicly available options away from the Charles Conder Primary School site and within walking distance at nearby facilities, sports grounds and parks.

The Education Directorate and the School Safety Program Team of the City and Environment Directorate will continue to work with the school to engage the school community to practice safety behaviours and use the identified options to mitigate the parking concerns raised.

Your correspondence on this matter is appreciated.

Trees—tree-removal guidelines—petition 11-25

Ms Cheyne, Minister for City and Government Services, dated 23 September 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Mr Parton concerning tree removal guidelines.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter of 24 June 2025 concerning petition E-PET 011-25, lodged by Mr Mark Parton regarding the ACT's tree removal guidelines.

The ACT Government appreciates the opportunity to provide information about the review of tree protection requirements under the *Urban Forest Act 2023* (the Act) and clarify the existing risk management framework applied under the Act.

The Act is ambitious, ensuring our tree canopy is sufficient now and into the future is a responsibility for the ACT Government, Industry and the Community. The Act introduced significant changes and the ACT Government made an election commitment to bring forward the review of the Act which is currently underway. The review of the Act is based on feedback from community and industry and seeks to improve the application process and the operation of the Act. The ACT Government is committed to ensuring that the Act is responsive to the Community's concerns about dangerous trees while ensuring that it does not get in the way of delivering other Government priorities (such as minor construction works). While these issues need to be addressed, they need to be balanced carefully to ensure that the objects of the legislation continue to be met.

The ACT Government acknowledges that the community is concerned that the Government gives more weight to the health of the tree than the safety to people and property and this feedback will be considered as the review progresses. The ACT Government employs qualified arborists who apply robust and internationally recognised methods to assess tree-related risks when assessing trees that are the subject of a removal application under the Act.

In alignment with ISO 31000 standards, arborists evaluate the likelihood and consequences of tree failure when assessing against the established [*Urban Forest \(Approval Criteria\) Determination 2025 \(No 1\) | Disallowable instruments*](#) (approval criteria). This assessment process seeks to ensure that risks to public safety and property are minimised as far as reasonably practicable.

Applications for tree removal are assessed against the approval criteria. Among other things, protected trees may be approved for removal if they:

- represent an unacceptable risk to public or private safety; or
- are causing or threatening substantial damage to substantial buildings, structures, or services; and
- where all other reasonable remedial treatments and risk mitigation measures have been determined to be ineffective.

The approval criteria was updated on 7 March 2025 in response to similar concerns from the Community. The updates were discussed in the Legislative Assembly on 8 May 2025 and Mr Mark Parton MLA described them as common-sense changes.

From January to June 2025, 63% of applications citing these criteria were approved. In addition to these criteria, the legislation allows for expedited applications in urgent circumstances or for minor works which can be made orally or in writing and are often approved immediately. The review will consider how applications for

minor works or urgent circumstances assess dangerous trees moving forward.

I look forward to sharing the outcomes of the review of the Act, including any updates to the approval criteria, in due course.

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

Roads—Woodberry Avenue, Coombs—parking—petition 30-25

Ms Cheyne, Minister for City and Government Services, dated 23 September 2025, in response to a petition lodged by Dr Paterson on parking congestion along Woodberry Avenue, Coombs.

The response read as follows:

Dear Mr Duncan

Thank you for your letter concerning petition E-PET 030-25, lodged by Dr Marisa Paterson MLA regarding parking congestions along Woodberry Avenue in Coombs.

The parking requirements of all developments in the ACT are assessed as part of the planning process. The Coombs estate was considered under an estate development plan where traffic flow, design standards and on-street parking were considered. Each development within the estate must also demonstrate that it can provide sufficient on-site parking to meet the needs of its occupants. The prescribed parking rates aim to balance the provision of parking and car usage with the promotion of more sustainable modes of transport, including active travel and public transport.

In relation to the development at 2 Woodberry Avenue and Pearlman Street, this development was assessed and determined by the independent planning and land authority (the Authority).

The development, located at Block 7 Section 3 Coombs, comprised of:

- 64 townhouses, with attached garages, and
- 70 apartments with undercroft, basement and surface carparking.

During the assessment process the development application (DA) was referred to the former Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate and was assessed by the Authority against the requirements of the Territory Plan and *Planning and Development Act 2007*.

On 24 September 2020, the DA (DA-202036822) was approved subject to conditions. Amongst other things, conditions were incorporated to increase on-site visitor parking spaces as well as to clarify parking dimensions and access to visitor spaces in the undercroft parking area.

This was to ensure that the development met the legislative requirements. In total, the development has provided thirteen visitor parking spaces which includes three surface spaces and ten visitor spaces within the undercroft areas.

The indented parking on Woodbury Avenue, between Newchurch Street and Terry

Connelly Street has been provided to serve the needs of visitors to the adjoining parkland.

A representative from the City and Environment Directorate (CED) visited Woodberry Avenue in August 2025 to assess the feasibility of introducing parking restrictions aimed at alleviating street congestion. The assessment concluded that limiting parking to one side of the street would effectively reduce congestion. Before any changes are implemented, CED will undertake consultation with affected residents and businesses. Amendments to parking arrangements will only be implemented where there is majority support from the local community.

CED has also explored the possibility of retrofitting indented parking along Woodberry Avenue. Implementing such a solution would require detailed design work, as the verge contains various underground services and utilities. Additionally, existing trees may need to be relocated to accommodate the changes.

Due to the scale and complexity, such a project would need to be considered within the broader Capital Works program and against competing priorities.

The ACT Government takes road safety and residents' amenity seriously and encourages all road users to share responsibility for road safety.

I trust the information provided above has been helpful.

Motion to take note of petitions

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

That the petition and responses so lodged be noted.

Crime—offences committed while on bail—petition 41-25

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (10.03): I rise today to speak to the petition that I have sponsored on the very important issue of ACT bail reform. This petition addresses a core issue for Canberrans—the right to safety, ensuring that individuals can live free from harm and danger. This right needs to be protected by sound and just legislation. It is an expectation of Canberrans that this government cares about their safety and the safety of the broader community. The current legislation, the ACT Bail Act 1992, is not sufficient to safeguard the community from repeat offenders who are let out on bail.

In March this year, my colleague the shadow minister for police, Ms Deborah Morris, spoke in this chamber about the need for tightening bail laws to reduce the endless merry-go-round of people being arrested for serious crimes, being released on bail and then committing further crimes.

The concerns expressed by Ms Morris in March came after the government abandoned the Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council, which had been given the task of examining bail reform. Since then, the government has announced a new review. A discussion paper was released in May. The Attorney-General summarised the review's goal as balancing "community safety, interests of the defendant and interests of the victim". The Attorney-General added, "For any changes we do make, we want to ensure they're evidence based, and the community understands why we're making them."

Here we are in September, and we have before us a petition that is evidence based, and which reflects the views of Canberrans, some of whom have coined the term “catch and release” when referring to the current bail legislation.

The reasons for this petition stem from the Bail Act 1992, which many constituents believe lacks mandatory, evidence-based testing and lacks sufficiently clear grounds to refuse bail for repeat offenders, which undermines both community safety and public confidence in the ACT justice system.

This petition summarises well the failures of the present bail system. It proposes a balanced approach to reforming bail laws and administration. It recommends taking a tougher stance on proven repeat offending. It also supports innovative approaches for low-risk or non-violent offences. It supports early intervention and rehabilitation.

There is a lot of wisdom in this petition, along with a lot of signatures. I hope the Attorney-General listens to the public and considers this petition’s analysis and recommendations as she finalises her review.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Voluntary assisted dying—implementation

Ministerial statement

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (10.06): I rise today to provide the Assembly and the community with an update on the progress of implementation of voluntary assisted dying—VAD—in the ACT.

Since the passage of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act in June last year, the Health and Community Services Directorate—previously the Health Directorate—and Canberra Health Services have been working diligently to implement the many changes to our health system needed to ensure that voluntary assisted dying services can commence from 3 November 2025.

The implementation work currently underway includes extensive consultation with various community and clinical groups, as well as recruiting and training authorised practitioners. The teams have also been hard at work establishing the Care Navigator Service and the Voluntary Assisted Dying Oversight Board and developing an information management system to support practitioners to meet the requirements of the legislation.

Since the start of the ACT’s journey with voluntary assisted dying, community engagement has been fundamental to informing and driving its policy development and implementation. We have benefited greatly from the engagement of community groups, including the Voluntary Assisted Dying Community and Consumer Consultation Group, which includes diverse representation from the disability sector and consumer groups.

This group has been meeting monthly to provide advice and feedback on various

documents and matters relating to voluntary assisted dying. They have provided feedback on the clinical guidelines, information packs, consumer-facing forms and website content for diverse communities. I would like to thank the members of the community and consumer consultation group for their engagement with this process. Our scheme is better for their involvement.

Engagement with clinicians has also been essential to ensure we have a clinical workforce in place prior to 3 November. This work has included ongoing delivery of training and information to healthcare workers about voluntary assisted dying. As part of this work, around 150 people attended the voluntary assisted dying conference on 23 August. This event included guest speakers with lived experiences of loved ones who have accessed voluntary assisted dying and clinicians from other jurisdictions who shared their lessons and insights regarding VAD services in their jurisdictions.

There have also been regular online and face-to-face forums and information sessions for clinicians seeking further information or who are interested in becoming voluntary assisted dying practitioners. More than 125 clinicians have attended these sessions, indicating a high level of engagement and interest from clinicians.

These forums and information sessions will continue post implementation to ensure that there are ongoing opportunities for learning and information sharing. Extensive resources and information will also be made available online through the ACT government website.

I am pleased to report that, so far, we have received more than 25 applications to become an authorised VAD practitioner. To become an authorised practitioner, clinicians must already have training and experience in caring for people with life-limiting conditions at end of life. They are also required to attend training to understand their responsibilities under the legislation to ensure eligible people can access the scheme and that they are doing so free from coercion.

So far, 12 practitioners have completed training, with a further 12 to start their training shortly. There may be further training opportunities for clinicians seeking to become authorised VAD practitioners prior to 3 November, and training will, of course, continue after this date. Practitioners will be supported through a community of practice which is currently being established and through ongoing support from the Health and Community Services Directorate and Canberra Health Services.

The Care Navigator Service will be a crucial part of supporting people through their voluntary assisted dying journey, playing a pivotal role in providing person-centred care. It will be the central point of contact for all inquiries related to voluntary assisted dying and will provide support and information for individuals in the community and authorised VAD practitioners. This service will be integral to supporting both individuals and clinicians to navigate through the voluntary assisted dying process. To stand up the Care Navigator Service, systems, policies and procedures are being developed, and recruitment is underway for a range of clinical positions.

I was also very pleased to announce the establishment of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Oversight Board with Ms Cheyne earlier this month. The board members have been appointed and had their first meeting. It gives me great confidence to have Darlene Cox

as the chair of the board. Ms Cox will be known to many, if not all, in this place through her long tenure as the Executive Director of the Health Care Consumers Association, noting that she has recently announced her resignation from this position. I look forward to working with her and the other board members.

This update covers just a few of the discrete pieces of work underway to implement voluntary assisted dying, but this is only a small portion. There has been substantial work across the government and our community to meet our implementation timeline. I would like to acknowledge the collaborative efforts of the Health and Community Services Directorate and Canberra Health Services in driving this work, along with the many teams across the ACT public service. I thank our community groups and clinicians who have engaged with the voluntary assisted dying implementation work. Your efforts and contributions are appreciated and valued. Thank you again to all involved in this important work.

I present the following paper:

Voluntary Assisted Dying implementation—Ministerial statement, 24 September 2025.
I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (10.12): I would like to thank the minister for the update on the progress that has been made towards implementing voluntary assisted dying here in the territory. It is very welcome to hear when it will commence.

I wish to place on the public record advocacy I have received that has identified a potential inconsistency between the act itself and the ACT Voluntary Assisted Dying Clinical Guidelines issued in August 2025. Under section 159 of the act, the director-general may make guidelines that must be consistent with the objects and principles of the act, and it is a disallowable instrument. I note that the guidelines dated 29 July 2025 have not yet been notified on the disallowable instrument register, and we will need to check whether that is intended to happen.

The act itself removed a fixed prognosis window and instead uses the term “approaching the end of their life”, with an express clarification that the eligibility may exist even if death within 12 months is uncertain.

I supported this inclusion when the act was debated, and I continue to do so. However, it is not defined in the act’s interpretation provisions, leaving it broad. This is common with newly enacted legislation, where the words of the statute are tested, clarified and refined over time.

The guidelines include a statement that someone with a terminal condition expected to deteriorate over many years would not be approaching end of life. The health minister has also publicly supported this interpretation. There is now a question as to whether or not there is an inconsistency between the act and the guidelines—or, to be more precise, whether the guidelines are in fact a narrowing of the terminology of the act which leaves the window open, even if death within 12 months is uncertain. Such inconsistency could be grounds for legal challenge in the future, so I believe it is important that this is

highlighted on the public record.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (10.14), in reply: In closing, and to respond very quickly to Mr Braddock, I have also had those representations and have had meetings with Dying With Dignity ACT, which is the organisation raising this concern. As I have noted to them, and as I would note on the record for Mr Braddock, “approaching the end of their life” is not the only condition or the only requirement in relation to eligibility for voluntary assisted dying. The person also needs to have a condition that is not only progressive but advanced to be eligible for voluntary assisted dying; hence that is why “early in a point of a diagnosis” is unlikely to meet the requirements around “advanced”. I think that a lot of the disagreement will end up being in that regard.

I disagree that the guidelines are inconsistent with the act and encourage people to take a broader view of what the eligibility requirements actually are.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

International Day of Older Persons 2025

Ministerial statement

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) (10.15): I am advised that we have some time pressure, so, in the interest of assisting with that, I will table my statement today. I present the following paper:

International Day of Old Persons 2025—Ministerial statement, 24 September 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Bimberi Youth Justice Centre—Inspector of Custodial Services

Healthy Centre Review—government response

Ministerial statement

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (10.16): The ACT government welcomes the findings of the ACT Custodial Inspector’s *Healthy centre review of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre 2024*. The review comments favourably on many aspects of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre’s operations and identifies areas of improvement that we are committed to addressing.

I am pleased to present the government’s response today. The ACT government is

committed to using the recommendations of this review and previous reviews to create long-lasting and systemic change. I thank the ACT Custodial Inspector, Rebecca Minty, her colleagues on the review team and all staff at the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services for their work on this important report. I also thank the young people at Bimberi for their contributions to the review.

Independent review and oversight mechanisms are critical to ensuring that the Bimberi Youth Justice Centre maintains its commitment to the provision of high-quality therapeutic care for the vulnerable young people in detention. I am grateful to work with such passionate and committed people who want to see Bimberi be a place of best practice. The Bimberi Youth Justice Centre plays a critical role in providing a safe, secure and rehabilitative environment for young people in custody in the ACT.

The review made 15 new recommendations: 14 recommendations, plus one recommendation in two parts. In response, the government has agreed to five recommendations, agreed in principle to five recommendations, noted three recommendations and marked two recommendations as complete. One of the recommendations calls on the government to implement recommendations from previous reviews into Bimberi.

The ACT government has already completed several recommendations, including reinstating physical contact for young people during visits, making it easier for young people to communicate confidentially with their lawyers, making internet access available to young people attending the Murrumbidgee School, and implementation of a memorandum of understanding between Bimberi and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, including the Court Transport Unit.

On top of these recommendations, we have also progressed nation-leading initiatives to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 years and the introduction of a therapeutic support panel legislated in the Children and Young People Act 2008. These initiatives are already delivering better outcomes for children and young people, diverting them from the criminal justice system where appropriate and addressing the root causes of concerning or harmful behaviour. But I appreciate that much more work is needed, as outlined in the inspector's report.

The ACT government is committed to using the recommendations of the second healthy centre review and previous reviews to create long-lasting and systemic change. As such, I am pleased to announce that the ACT government will work collaboratively with young people and government and non-government organisations to develop an ACT youth justice strategic plan. The plan will be aimed at strengthening the youth justice system and delivering on government commitments to improve outcomes for young people.

The plan will establish a five-year roadmap for the ACT's youth justice system, mapping our ongoing commitment to youth justice reform. It aims to improve the wellbeing of young people who are at risk of offending or are already involved in the youth justice system. At its core is a commitment to closing the gap, specifically target 11, which aims to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in detention by at least 30 per cent by 2031. The roadmap will also take into account the findings and recommendations of the Jumbunna institute's final report

on its independent review into the over-representation of First Nations people in the ACT.

The strategic plan will align closely with the existing reforms being undertaken in Children, Youth and Families and build on the important work of Next Steps for Our Kids 2022-2030 in order to provide earlier and more intensive support for families when problems first appear. We all acknowledge that the way to do better for young people in the youth justice system is to intervene early and prevent them from reaching the criminal justice system in the first place.

Many of the review's recommendations will also be addressed through the development of a new model of care for young people who are at risk. The ACT government will undertake a holistic review of Bimberi's model of care, assess national and international models of care in youth detention settings and consider implications for legislative and policy reform. The ACT government will provide six-monthly updates to the OICS regarding the implementation of recommendations, as requested. We look forward to future work together as the government continues to improve the experience of young people at Bimberi.

In closing, the ACT government cannot provide high-quality, fit-for-purpose detention services to young people without the dedication and commitment of government staff, oversight bodies and community partners. I thank staff from the Health and Community Services Directorate, the Education Directorate, Justice Health Services, the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, and our other key partners for their ongoing commitment to young people in Bimberi and the wider youth justice system.

The government response demonstrates our continued commitment to ensuring Bimberi provides services that are human rights compliant, adaptive to contemporary youth justice practice and responsive to the individual needs of young people in detention.

I present the following papers:

Custodial Inspector Act—A review of a Detention Place by the ACT Custodial Inspector—Healthy Centre Review of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre 2024—Government response, dated September 2025.

Government response to the Office of the ACT Inspector of Custodial Services Healthy Centre Review of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre 2024—Ministerial statement, 24 September 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the papers.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (10.22): I welcome the statement this morning and look forward to reading the government response in detail. This response is to the review that was tabled nine months ago. Since then, there has been another report by the ACT Custodial Inspector, the ACT Ombudsman, the ACT Human Rights Commissioner and the ACT Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner, as a national preventative mechanism, with an additional six recommendations made.

The healthy centre review, to which the government is responding today, as the minister indicated, already recommends the implementation of recommendations from previous reviews. Following through on recommendations that have been agreed in the past is something that seems to come up repeatedly. To me, it seems alarming that a review would call for follow-through on previous recommendations. I sincerely hope that the recommendations agreed today, through the government's response, are followed through in a timely manner and that we do not see such recommendations being required in the future.

I very much welcome the announcement that an ACT youth justice strategic plan will be developed. As the healthy centre review indicated, this comes after the expiry of the previous 10-year blueprint for the youth justice system three years ago, in 2022, so this is an urgent piece of work. I hope it is done promptly and efficiently. We in this place all know that we are currently seeing increased numbers of young people in detention compared to the 10-year trend. Of course, there is subsequent pressure on staffing, which ultimately results in reduced access for young people to essential services. It is a burden on staff who are trying to do the right thing—trying to help children set themselves on a new trajectory in life. They perhaps default to focusing more on creating a secure environment when they are overburdened and understaffed.

We all know the plan needs to include adequate investment in upstream programs to prevent young people coming in contact with the youth justice system in the first place. Of course, that requires ongoing government engagement with young people and those with lived experience of the youth justice system. This is the best possible way to develop such a process.

Concerns have been raised by community members who have either been in Bimberi or had their children in Bimberi. They need to see more connection between services within detention and what is happening on the outside. Continuity between the inside and the outside is vital, and this is something reflected in the healthy centre review. There is a call for a kind of recalibration of risk in the centre and the creation of more opportunities for young people to engage in the community outside of the custodial environment, so that, when they are released, there are new options for young people to move in a different direction in their lives.

It is good to hear the minister address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in detention. At this point, the proportion of children in detention in the ACT who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander has increased since the National Agreement on Closing the Gap was signed.

While I warmly welcome today's response and look forward to actions being taken, based on the government's response—and, again, I look forward to reviewing that in detail—I hope the response to the next review or similar reviews is delivered as promptly as possible, with recommendations being actioned in a timely and meaningful way.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

High-risk weather season 2025-2026—commencement Ministerial statement

DR PATERSON (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Women, Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, Minister for Corrections and Minister for Gaming Reform) (10.25): I present the following paper:

Commencement of high-risk weather season—Ministerial statement, 24 September 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Appropriation Bill 2025-2026

Schedule 1—Appropriations—Proposed expenditure.

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate—Part 1.7.

Debate resumed from 23 September 2025.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (10.26): I want to talk about a few aspects of this line item, including arts and some economic aspects. Art is so important to our culture here in Canberra. It makes life better, it brings us together and it helps us understand what is going on around us. It is also really good for the economy. The ACT has the largest proportion of creative workers in Australia, but our arts are underfunded and our creative economy is declining. That is why the funding uplift in arts grants is welcome. It is something the ACT Greens have long advocated for. That will really support our artists. But, if government are serious about their vision for Canberra to become the arts capital of Australia, we need permanent long-term funding for our artists and we need to make sure that we have locked in the funding increases for our organisations and centres.

We are a little disappointed that we only have two years of funding so far and there is no certainty after that. We are really worried about when the organisation and centre uplift funding will kick in. The ACT Labor government is still funnelling quite a lot of money into the arts, but a lot of it is going into buildings rather than people, and I think that is showing. This is something that I hear a lot when I talk to people in the sector. Our artists and our arts workers are still struggling to make ends meet.

We have some more amazing facilities on the way and we have some funding to fix some of the older ones that really need it, but we do not have a really clear sense of how we will use all of them to create our arts ecology and how they will all interact together. How are we going to scale up exhibitions in the ACT, share our resources and build the capacity and skills of artists in the sector throughout their careers? We are still looking at this and it is looking a little patchy to us.

I want to touch on the existing Arts, Culture and Creative Policy, which ends in 2026.

The government says this is the answer when we ask about a performing arts strategy. We have been steered towards this. It is quite high level. It is actually missing some of the finer detail that a lot of our artists and arts centres are looking for in a performing arts strategy. The policy does not yet detail how we are managing and integrating multiple venues. We do not yet have a needs analysis on the technical skills across the arts sector in Canberra.

I appreciate the fact that we have an arts needs analysis underway. That is really good, and that will provide some answers. That was funded in last year's budget, not this year's budget. The delay to start that work has not assisted us when we are going through a bit of a restructure. When we are asking the sector and a lot of the organisations and centres to figure out their four-year plan and lodge their funding submissions, it is tricky for them because they do not have the questions answered yet from the needs analysis, which could have been finished much earlier. That could have fed straight into the strategic work that they are now being asked to do.

The government have clarified that they will commence consultation with the sector on the new arts policy in 2027. It is good that there will be consultation. That is after the current policy expires. We are seeing a bit of a pattern from this government: policies and strategies finish before consultation on the next version even commences. It typically takes at least 12 months from starting consultation to having a good, developed policy and strategy in place. It is unhelpful to start work on the new one that late.

Canberra's arts community really needs certainty around the 25 per cent arts organisations and centre funding uplift. We Greens believe that it was needed in this budget. We were hoping to see it in this budget. We expected to see it there. We pushed for that in our negotiations with the Labor Party. The only official response we have had is the same response that I think a lot of us are hearing: "That was a Labor election commitment and it will be delivered during the term." I am glad that it will be delivered during the term, but a 25 per cent uplift that arrives in 2028 instead of 2025 is almost an indexation over the term. It is almost not an uplift at all.

If we can get that in next year's budget, that will be essential. Some of these centres and organisations are genuinely on the edge of viability. I think that is a really essential uplift that is needed just to keep them going—not even necessarily to meet the goals of becoming Australia's arts capital, but just to keep going what we have at the moment.

Organisations have been asked by government to put in their bid for the funding that will commence in January 2027 and, for the centres, January 2028. If they are doing that and they have not yet got their uplift in funding, that will be really hard to meet.

The ACT Labor government, by continuing simply to say they will deliver on election commitments but without giving a time as to when, are not giving anybody the kind of certainty they need to plan and to make sure that they have staff and continuity to get them through this period.

It is really important that the minister can give the sector a clear steer on timeframes. That will allow the sector confidently to plan for their next three to five years. Without that, it is very difficult for them to meet government's requirements to be planning for their programming for the next few years and to be putting in their funding bids when

they are not even sure when they are getting their uplift.

We would also like to see the minister advocate for a better rate than CPI and to push for a rate that is pinned to WPI, which is what some of the other sectors get. In the arts sector, most of your costs are salaries. That is the primary cost, and it makes much more sense to have an indexation linked to WPI. That was in the Greens supply and confidence agreement with Labor. CPI is not matching the increases that the sector is facing, particularly when we have said we want to pay artists fairly for their work, and particularly when we have fair remuneration principles in place. It would be much more useful to have WPI indexation.

It is difficult, because every time we raise this, we are told that this is a matter for Treasury, and often the sector is told it will be a matter that gets made from one budget to the next, and there is no certainty in that. It would be better simply to have an up-front conversation, saying, “What is the best indexation rate and can we please just have that factored in?”

There are a number of artists and some organisations that are planning to move from the ACT, to go somewhere else where they can more sustainably practise. Some of our organisations are on the edge. It would be foolish to disengage from some of these small funding amounts. If we lose that talent, it will be hard to get it back and, if we lose that talent, we will certainly not be meeting our goal to become Australia’s arts capital.

I want to talk a little bit about some of the sport and recreation elements in the budget. There are actually quite a lot of positive things here in Belconnen, in Ginninderra. It is really good to see the expansion of the Belconnen Basketball Stadium, the renewal works at Charnwood skate park, the Charnwood netball courts, the upgrades at Latham Oval and the female-friendly change room upgrades at Macquarie, Giralang and Kaleen.

I also want to highlight the upgrades at Fraser Oval. That was an ACT Greens election commitment. I am hoping ACT Sport and Recreation is working closely with the Education Directorate to ensure those upgrades support the whole community, as that is the only oval in the suburb. It is really important for the school, but it is actually important for the whole community of Fraser as well.

Ms Berry: It turns out there is one minister for both those areas. Yes.

MS CLAY: That is great to hear, Minister Berry. It makes the consultation much simpler. It is good to see investment in infrastructure; similarly, as with the arts, we need to make sure that we are funding our grassroots sport and development pathways as well as funding some of the more elite and established pathways. I understand that part of this is coming through upgraded infrastructure, and I am hoping that is done in a true co-design manner with the sporting communities to make sure that those facilities are helping us achieve our goals in Canberra.

I also want to touch briefly on some of the economic, financial and revenue management areas in the budget. We heard very strongly last year at the election the Labor Party presenting themselves as a vision of prudence and care for public finances and economic rationalism. The message was really strong. The message was, “Trust us

with your money.” With rents and mortgages going up so much, and with the cost of living going up so much, I think that is a message that really cut through. It is no wonder that Canberrans did prize that promise of financial discipline and financial competence.

The reality of the budget we have seen is not matching that image. We are seeing a lot of moving parts with public finances. We are seeing a growing deficit. We are seeing a lot of hopes that things might change in future but not a lot of firm plans. Our health costs are up more than a quarter, while our surgery waitlists are some of the longest in the country. While our people are on waiting lists, while they are not in good health, because there is surgery that they need, they are not fully economically active and they are not fit for work. There is a huge personal cost to them, but there is also a huge cost to our economy.

With our HR information management system, nearly \$80 million was written off. Our Digital Health Record was more than \$100 million over budget. Our school budgets are now becoming at risk. *(Second speaking period taken.)*

Labor is allowing the ACT to slip down in our national literacy and numeracy league tables, behind Victoria and now also behind New South Wales. I think it is really important that we give people the best education that brings so many more life choices. It also brings much more economic empowerment in the future. We cannot afford to allow those standards to slip, and we also need to look at how we are funding our schools and our education.

Meanwhile, we are seeing the Labor budget taking away funding from a lot of groups that need it. The budget has made a lot of small cuts in areas that will feel it deeply, in community and other services. There are a lot of short-term funding models locked into this budget, and all of us are very interested to see what happens in another two years, because we do not know whether the funds will be reinstated then or whether that means they will be cut. There is a lot of uncertainty for the community and environmental sectors in particular at the moment.

There have been some positive moves in raising revenue. I understand that a lot of these levers are at the commonwealth level, but we do have some here at the ACT level. Labor has brought in the regressive health levy. The Greens negotiated that down by \$150 per household, and we agreed with ACT Labor that they need to seek to eliminate that health levy altogether in future years.

We then went into negotiations and offered an alternative, our Greens big corporations tax. It went further than some of the payroll business taxes that Labor had put up, and it was very specifically targeted to hit the big end of town—the largest firms, like banks and supermarkets—and ask them to pay a little more, and a little more that was unlikely to be much noticed from their billion-dollar profits. That levy could raise up to \$107 million annually, if we fully implemented it. That is a tool that is sitting there and that can be used in future years.

I was pleased that the Assembly agreed to my motion the other week, which looked at a lot of options for raising further commonwealth revenue. We are looking forward to getting more productive negotiations and better funding from our commonwealth government as a result. I will run through some of the measures that we agreed to there.

It was seeking minimum fifty-fifty commonwealth funding on all ACT infrastructure projects where the total project costs exceeded \$5 million. We know we will not get funding for all of that, but it would be great to see the public reporting about which of those projects sought commonwealth funding, how much was sought and how much was actually granted.

It was about writing to the commonwealth government to seek a waiver on our historic housing debt, which has been supplied for other states. It was about employing new health analysts in Treasury to assist the health directorate to achieve the national efficient price or a small jurisdiction equivalent, and reporting on progress in annual reports. We know how much our health costs are increasing. It is important that we have the right talent available in Treasury to make sure that we are tracking that, that we are managing that, and that we are doing everything we can in commonwealth negotiations to improve on that.

It was about writing to the commonwealth government to seek a fairer allocation in lieu of the commonwealth public servant payroll tax. I understand—it has been explained—that we do get an adjustment for that. The adjustment that we are getting is around \$51 million. Treasury have not modelled what we are missing out on for that. Treasury say it is not their tax, so it is not their job to model it. Other economists have modelled it, and the other economists are modelling that we are losing half a billion, up to \$1.5 billion. A \$51 million adjustment is not taking us very far. It is also about making sure that we are completing our aged-care assessments and our NDIS applications for hospitalised patients within a week of first admission and lobbying the commonwealth for sufficient home care packages and residential places.

The Assembly agreed that the modelling, the letters, the responses and the updates should be provided to us by the government by 3 December, and we are really looking forward to seeing how far we can progress with an ACT Labor government and a federal Labor government working together with goodwill.

We did put up another measure, which did not pass the Assembly. We thought it would be more palatable to ask the commonwealth for more funding, at the same time as we offered the commonwealth a new funding revenue source. I was listening to Matt Grudnoff on the radio this morning, as he was talking about this with Ross Solly. We suggested a fossil fuel tax. A fossil fuel tax is a very popular tax. I have never seen a tax in Australia that is so popular. Typically, when you start a conversation about a tax, most people do not want a new tax. This one is supported by 60 per cent of Australians. I have never seen such a tax polled, where the vast majority of Australians would like this new tax introduced.

A fossil fuel tax would raise billions for the entire country. It would probably raise enough revenue to fix most of our state and territory budgets with a single revenue measure, and it would not impact on everyday Australians, which is no doubt why most of the smart countries are taxing international resources like this, and it is why it is so well supported by the majority of Australians. That measure did not get through. The Canberra Liberals and ACT Labor intentionally removed that. It was about advocating for it, and they do not want to advocate for a fossil fuel tax. I am quite disappointed to hear that.

We are hopeful, because ACT Labor has been talking about a different kind of resources tax. It is obvious that we would tax fossil fuels more highly than we would tax other minerals and resources. Of course, it would be great if we were taxing all of those resources. We are hoping that, despite having intentionally removed and voted down that advocacy for a fossil fuel tax, our colleagues may decide that it is a good idea after all and suggest it to their federal counterparts.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (10.42): ACT Labor believes that Canberra is a great place to live, work and thrive. We know that vocational education and training creates better lives and more opportunities for Canberrans. A high performing and world-class vocational education and training sector is a crucial part of our plan to skill up and support our workforce into the future.

The 2025-26 budget builds on our investment in the VET sector. We will continue to support apprentices with an \$18 million investment in the User Choice program. The User Choice program provides subsidised traineeships to eligible learners, providing them with nationally recognised qualifications and subsidies for registered training organisations to deliver quality training and to help businesses with the cost of apprentices. Critically, the User Choice program establishes a connection between the employer, the trainee and the registered training provider, meaning trainees have an established relationship with an employer so they can reap the benefits of skilling up sooner. Through this budget we are boosting apprenticeship pathways for six critical building and construction trades by increasing subsidies under the User Choice program to 90 per cent.

The 2025-26 budget also continues our investment in the Skilled Capital program, which provides support to students to gain vocational qualifications where they have no other opportunity to engage in an apprenticeship or traineeship. This \$4 million investment ensures that vocational training is available to all Canberrans in a way that is flexible to their circumstances.

Along with our increased investments in free TAFE, the new campus at CIT Woden, which is also housing our new Cyber Security Centre of Excellence, and providing more cost-of-living support for apprentices and trainees, the ACT Labor government is committed to growing the ACT workforce to 300,000 jobs by 2030 and supporting young workers and career-changers with high quality training.

Mr Speaker, Canberra's cultural life makes our city special. The arts and creative industries play a central role in supporting the wellbeing of Canberrans and enriching our city's identity and economy. That is why the 2025-26 budget continues our investment in the ACT Arts Fund. The Arts Fund provides around \$12 million to support individual artists, arts organisations and community groups to undertake activities that create new work, foster professional development, enhance skills and engage with participants and audiences.

Recognising that there are more opportunities to provide funding for high quality projects that deserve support, as part of the 2024 election, ACT Labor pledged to provide more support and funding for local artists and arts projects. Over the next two

years, we will deliver on this commitment by investing more than \$2.2 million to help more local artists bring their ideas to life, representing a 50 per cent increase. This budget also includes an increase in arts project grant funding to \$1.5 million per year for two years, particularly for projects that enhance arts and cultural outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.

Mr Speaker, Canberra continues to gain international recognition for being a great place to produce digital media. We have seen immense success from productions such as *The Code*, *Secret City* and *Total Control*, and both seasons of the recent ABC hit show *Austin* have seen Canberra showcased on screen nationally and internationally. The 2025-26 budget will invest nearly \$3 million over the next four years for Screen Canberra's operations for local screen and digital games industries, fostering a diverse pipeline of talent, encouraging sustainable local growth and delivering industry development initiatives.

Video game development is the largest creative industry in the world. Local gamers will be happy to hear that this new funding will allow Canberra's games developers to access funds to further develop and commercialise their products, linking Canberra with billions of gamers online and in competitions. These initiatives support our mission to build a vibrant, sustainable and future-focused arts sector.

Mr Speaker, we have more businesses in the ACT than ever before, with the growth rate of businesses outstripping every other state and territory over the past four years. We are committed to making it easier for people to do business in the city. The 2025-26 budget continues the government's commitment to the implementation of the ACT Small Business Strategy. The Small Business Strategy highlights our commitment to improving businesses' experience when dealing with government, supporting businesses to start, operate, grow, and innovate, and supporting the future of small businesses.

The 2025-26 budget provides funding to extend industry event sponsorship, as well as the Canberra Business Advice and Support Service, providing small businesses with access to free tailored business advice. This funding also extends the Social Enterprise Grant Program, which supports local innovation and growth of social enterprises in Canberra.

The 2025-26 budget delivers on commitments we took to the 2024 election to make Canberra a place of choice for businesses, artists, and creatives, as well as trainees. This budget will grow and support our skilled workforce: providing high quality, vocational education and training; backing the creative industry that enriches our city's identity and economy; and supporting our small businesses. I commend the bill to the Assembly.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.48): I would like to highlight the lack of arts facilities in the Murrumbidgee electorate. I hope that the needs analysis will highlight this gap and invest in facilities in this area. I would also like to highlight the lack of an indoor sports stadium and the lack of a 50-metre pool in Woden town centre after losing two 50-metre pools.

It is unclear how the budget complies with section 11(5) of the Financial Management Act 1996, which requires the budget to be prepared taking into account "the object of

providing a basis for sustainable social and economic services and infrastructure fairly to all ACT residents”. The budget must also be prepared taking into account the “principles of responsible financial management”.

I would now like to move onto a Treasury aspect. The ACT is unique in reporting its fiscal position in terms of the headline net operating balance. This measure is derived by including the superannuation return adjustment, which is an estimate of expected returns from the territory’s Superannuation Provision Account. On a net operating balance basis, which is closer to the fiscal measure used by other states and which is the fiscal measure agreed by the heads of state, territory and commonwealth treasuries, the ACT deficit would be around \$680.7 million in 2025-26 and would not return to surplus until 2028-29. However, the surplus in 2028-29, without the superannuation return adjustment, is only \$12.7 million. Is this a real surplus when we know that health expenditure in the budget is only growing by an average of 1.6 per cent over the forward estimates and that the government has acknowledged that the provision for health expenses may not be sufficient to meet rising cost and high pressures?

Given the growing borrowings and interest payments, which reach \$22 billion and \$1 billion respectively by 2028-29, the reality is that we need to manage the budget better and there needs to be a robust conversation about priorities. It is time to stop pretending we are returning to surplus by including an estimate of expected returns from the Superannuation Provision Account that are never included in the consolidated financial statements net operating balance at the end of the reporting period. The consolidated financial statements have not reported a net operating surplus for 13 years—since 2011-12.

We need to look at the reality of the budget in terms of how we stop the growth of borrowings and interest payments and how we can use this funding to best meet the needs of all Canberrans, particularly our community sector so that we have more resources to support the most vulnerable members of our community.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (10.52): I rise today in my capacity as ACT Greens spokes for public service transformation. I would like to begin by re-asserting that the public service is a crucial asset to our democracy, and I strongly advocate that public servants should be empowered to provide frank and fearless advice to the government. To the ACT public servants out there: I appreciate the efforts you are contributing towards making the territory a better place.

The ACT Greens believe that the ACT government should be a leader and innovator in good governance, ensuring that decision-making places the wellbeing of the ACT community, both the current and the future, at its core. A crucial element of this commitment to good governance is upholding the political independence between the Legislative Assembly and the ACT public service. When those boundaries blur, we must examine the causes, address entrenched issues and strengthen the ACTPS so the public servants have the independence to do their jobs as intended.

The ACT Greens advocate for stronger mechanisms for accountability within the public service, particularly at the senior executive level. Whilst I enthusiastically welcome the head of services’ sentiment that she “walks the talk” of political impartiality, the evidence presented across the estimates process suggests that this neutrality is not

consistently upheld in practice.

In response to questions taken on notice during estimates, the Chief Minister confirmed my longstanding concerns regarding the Public Sector Standards Commissioner's limited capacity to progress investigations in a timely manner. Excluding cases of extenuating circumstances, such as illness, the average time to complete an investigation, from notification to resolution, is currently 91 days. This begs the question of whether more staffing should be allocated to support the commissioner's work and remedy this issue.

It would be remiss of me to wrap up without commenting on injury management and industrial relations policy—most notable, what is not in the budget. Members are by now familiar with the Workplace Relations Bill, which will be discussed later today, to prop up the ACT's most dangerous industry of training horses for racing. I do not wish to pre-empt that debate, but it is interesting in terms of the context of this budget debate. In last week's answers to questions without notice, the minister was unable to identify the cost of this scheme. The minister's diary showed a meeting with the Canberra Racing Club and the minister on 22 May, which may have been a genesis of that initiative. This initiative has clearly been developed outside of the budget process and without the scrutiny of the expenditure review committee. I would invite anyone to correct me if that is not the case.

It is interesting that, after being lectured for the past week and half by the government in terms of the process of the budget, it appears to have not applied in this particular instance. It has become clear that the government are always capable of making decisions with and without budget. If something is a political priority, they will move whatever mountains are necessary to make that happen. If something is politically inconvenient, they will invoke budget processes to tell you why it could not possibly be done.

Horseracing, and by extension the viability of the horse training profession, is clearly a political priority for the government. They proved as much when they voted against amendments in the budget earlier during the debate. With the banning of engineered stone, Labor are now planning to blatantly and expressly support and subsidise the most dangerous industry in the ACT.

In closing, I want to reiterate my support for the ACT public service. I want to see it to be the best public service that it can be. It is the buttress of our democracy, and I am determined to take the necessary steps to defend it.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (10.55): While the government has spent a fair bit of this budget debate so far talking about what it is going to spend and what it is going to do, I want to take this opportunity to talk about the line item in the budget that the government prefers not to talk about—interest. Interest expenses do matter. Unlike other line items in the budget, they do not matter because of what is going to be purchased or activity that is going to happen; they matter because of what we cannot do. Interest is the cost of having done something before you can afford to. Every dollar we pay in interest is a dollar that cannot be spent on hospitals, on schools or on community safety. Right now, interest is eating a bigger slice of the ACT budget than at any time before. The government's own budget confirms it.

The 2025-26 budget sets out the trajectory in black and white. Interest expenses were already over half a billion dollars, which is already an incredible expense. By comparison, the bill, when Mr Barr was about to take the reins of treasury, was near enough \$100 million. It took a decade before it reached about \$250 million, around 2021-22. But four years later, that number has doubled, and now we are staring down the barrel of another doubling in four years. The pattern is exponential. Interest is now forecast to climb to about \$1 billion by 2028-29. On the government figures, that takes interest to nearly 10 per cent of the total general government sector spending across the four years.

Interest is, undeniably, the fastest-growing expense line in the budget, and the government is doing nothing to fix it. On their own preferred, if flawed, measure, the headline net operating balance is still deep in the red—a \$425 million deficit in 2025-26, before speculative surpluses years down the track. With constant revelations of unbudgeted costs and rose-tinted projections, it is doubtful that we will ever see a result that looks like that.

Labor is running repeated operating deficits, layering debt on debt and blowing more and more on interest. The estimates process drew the link plainly. Pegasus Economics warned the ACT Assembly that the ACT is now borrowing to fund everyday operations. Cash operating deficits from 2023-24 through 2025-26 mean that debt rises to pay for today's bills, not tomorrow's infrastructure; today's bills—the cost of doing things now.

The committee shared that concern and recorded the interest line as the fastest-growing cost in the budget. It is clearly not sustainable and it is not fair on households already carrying the burden of higher taxes, fees and charges. And the risk just went up. Two weeks ago, S&P Global Ratings cut the ACT's rating from AA+ to AA, citing large deficits and structurally higher debt. You do not have to look for a man in finance or have a trust fund to know what comes next. The downgrade means higher borrowing costs, and higher borrowing costs mean more interest and fewer frontline services.

The credit rating downgrade pushes up costs and adds pressure precisely when Canberra and Canberrans can least afford it. Everyone pays. Whoever you are, you pay. If you rent, you pay. If you pay your mortgage, you pay. If you are retired, you pay. If you have kids, you pay. If you are wealthy, you pay. If you are poor, if you are doing it tough, you pay. If you are homeless, you pay through the lack of services. If you are an eighth-generation Canberran, you pay. If you are a new migrant, you pay. If you are six-five with blue eyes, you pay.

Labor has ignored every warning for the past decade about the cost of Barr-onomics, and now interest has become the unavoidable lens through which every other choice must be viewed. When interest is the fastest-growing expense in the budget, every new dollar that the government raises from families in rates, levies and fees, is less effective, because more of it disappears into debt servicing before a single nurse, teacher or police officer is funded. That is the economic reality. The problem is the pattern: persistent operating deficits, growing reliance on one-off fixes and cost blowouts that push more borrowing into an already stretched balance sheet. In that environment, interest does not just fund bridges and hospitals, as the government would like us to think; it finances the gaps in basic budgeting.

The government does not like talking about how interest compares with other budget line items, but it is important to understand the scale of this problem. By the final year of the budget, interest will be nearly double what it is today. It will be 9.5 per cent of all government revenues—equivalent to nearly 10 per cent of what the government brings in across every source. If you look at just what the ACT raises, it will be over 26 per cent of every dollar the ACT raises in own-source revenue. I will say it again: 26 per cent. More than a quarter of the money raised by the ACT through rates, payroll tax, fees and charges—26 per cent—is gone on interest.

Or maybe we should look more specifically. The Treasurer went to great lengths yesterday to blame spending on hospitals for Canberra's rates being higher than the north shore of Sydney. But let us put this into context. No 1, New South Wales actually have hospitals—they have to pay for them as well. It is not a council responsibility. The New South Wales government manage to do it themselves.

But also, let us compare the amount the government spends on interest with what the government takes from residential rates—rates paid on every property, whether commercial or residential, owner occupied or rented. By the end of the budget period, general rates will raise just over a billion dollars per year for the government, up from just over \$800 million last year. That is roughly a 30 per cent increase. And it will reach a billion dollars a year. It sounds sort of familiar. The government's interest bill will be nearly equal to its total rates grab.

The Chief Minister's so-called tax reform was supposed to put Canberra on a more sustainable footing by increasing the amount of money Canberrans would be paying through their rates. But it is gone. That entire rates-take gets eaten up by the interest bill. The community sees the effects, because, when interest takes a bigger slice, there is less room to absorb cost shocks in health, less room to keep up with enrolments in schools and less room to fund the police station that the government promised in Molonglo. *(Second speaking period taken.)*

Meanwhile, households are told to pay more through levies, higher fees and charges and double-digit utility increases, only to watch a growing share of their money diverted to creditors instead of services.

The government love to say they are using debt to fund so-called generational infrastructure and that interest is the unavoidable cost that we carry for investing for growth. But the only thing generational about Labor's debt and interest, is the generational burden.

The government has been borrowing and borrowing for years now. On the standard national measure, Mr Barr never delivered a surplus during his tenure. He could not manage the budget, and he has left the problem for other people to clean up. As Treasurer, Mr Barr inherited negative net debt. There was more money in the bank than money that government owed. But now we are staring down the barrel of net debt surpassing \$13 billion. We are staring down the barrel of total borrowings being \$21.93 billion by the end of the budget estimates—\$21.93 billion; with a “b”.

It is irresponsible to leave that sort of debt to other people to clean up. It is irresponsible

to leave that for the next generation. The people the government is asking to pay for today's spending are the same people who cannot afford to buy a house in Canberra and can barely afford to pay rent. They will have to contend with a disrupted world at the same time as they try to contend with the Steel-Barr debt burden. The so-called generational infrastructure the government is spending on will have a useful life, in 20 or 30 years some of that will simply be considered old. If the current approach to debt and interest continues, the debt will stay—it will be on the books at full value. The government continues to use interest-only debt that could be on the books forever.

We are at an inflection point, and the government has a responsibility to future generations and to those who are already doing it tough in Canberra. If you want to reduce the bite of interest, you must stop feeding the debt. That means living within the operating revenue and gripping the biggest drivers of overspend, starting with health, so that we are not back here every year topping up the Treasurer's Advance and growing the interest bill again.

The budget sets the benchmark. A \$424.9 million operating deficit this year and interest heading toward \$1 billion by 2028-29 is intolerable. It should not be supported by anyone in this place. There have been repeated warnings. The estimates committee has put the risks on the record, including the warning that the territory has been borrowing for operations, and S&P has delivered the penalty for falling short: a downgrade that will make every future decision harder and every dollar of debt more expensive.

Canberrans are practical people. They are intelligent people. They do not expect miracles, but they do expect a government that respects them and respects the money that the government takes. The government needs to deliver on its promises without sending the interest bill through the roof. As I have said, it is irresponsible to leave it to future generations to clean up this mess.

Right now, too much of every tax dollar is already being lost to debt servicing. It is not a victimless line item. It is not something that should be quiet or spread across the picture of the entire budget. It is a genuine problem in the ACT. It means fewer nurses on the ward, fewer teachers in classrooms and fewer police on the street. The budget repair has to begin with telling the truth, being honest about interest and acting accordingly: bringing the operating budget back into the black. The government must contain the drivers of the overspend, so we are not borrowing for day-to-day costs, and stop asking families to pay more just to service yesterday's decisions. That is how you put downward pressure on interest expense. That is how you rebuild confidence in the territory's finances and in the budget. That is how you protect the services people actually rely on. The longer we wait, the more it is going to cost. There is a tipping point—and we are at it. The numbers and the downgrade have made that abundantly clear.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (11.09): As finance minister, I am pleased to say that this budget makes investment decisions that appropriately balance the need to improve our fiscal position, while continuing to deliver high-quality services and implementing new initiatives that meet the most significant needs of our community. The budget makes substantial investments to deliver critical services in health, housing, education, community services, and cost-of-living support.

It is no accident that the ACT economy remains strong. Wages are growing and our unemployment rate is significantly below the national average. This reflects the work that the Chief Minister talked about yesterday and provides the foundation to get the budget back on a sustainable footing.

Through this budget, we are tackling the near-term pressures, including cost of living, and investing for the future. We are delivering on election commitments and making important progress in key projects and reforms. We have also made some tough decisions to address the very real budget pressures we face, and we know there is more to do. Having used the territory's balance sheet to support our economy, our businesses, non-government organisations and the community through a series of shocks, we are shifting our focus to fiscal recovery.

Through the 2025-26 budget, we have delivered on our election commitment to extend the Sustainable Household Scheme by providing an additional \$75 million in low-interest loans for battery storage, zero-emissions vehicles and chargers, ceiling insulation and energy-efficient electric appliances. This scheme has been a success, with more than 23,000 energy-efficient products purchased or installed in ACT homes since the scheme started in 2021. This investment brings the total funding for the scheme to \$355 million.

To help balance the scheme's objectives, and while recognising that interest rates are much higher today than they were in 2021, a low three per cent interest rate will apply to loans written from 1 July 2025, excluding Home Energy Support Program loans. Rooftop solar will also be included as an eligible product only for Home Energy Support Program loans. These changes to the scheme focus on prioritising funding towards electrification and ensuring it is available to households that need it most.

The ACT Labor government has also delivered on its commitment to extend cost-of-living support for Canberra residents. Apprentices and trainees typically are among the lowest earners in the ACT. We will continue to provide currently enrolled ACT apprentices and trainees residing in the ACT with a cost-of-living support payment of \$250 in 2025-26. First-year apprentices and trainees will receive an additional \$250 to help them with costs associated with buying tools and equipment.

The government is also permanently increasing the electricity, gas and water rebate by \$50 to \$800 per annum. This will continue to provide cost-of-living support for low-income and vulnerable households who are disproportionately affected by cost-of-living pressures.

Through this budget, the Revenue Office will receive \$12½ million over two years to continue planning and design for its future business needs. This is a strategic initiative to modernise the Revenue Office's IT platforms and support the management of the territory's future tax revenue streams. A more contemporary system will provide efficiencies and allow staff to be reallocated to customer-facing activities and to focus on core activities.

This funding will also support continued modernisation of the Revenue Office, including the delivery of an updated user-friendly website and improved taxpayer

education and guidance materials. These enhancements will strengthen taxpayer engagement by improving accessibility and simplifying and improving the readability of content. It builds on Revenue Office work to review its taxpayer correspondence to improve clarity and accessibility. Together, these initiatives will help users to better understand their obligations and access to concession schemes.

The 2025-26 budget identified that the government would achieve savings by constraining the rate of growth in employee and non-employee expenditure across our larger agencies. All ministers have been asked to work with their directorates and agencies to prioritise their activities using a structured assessment framework. This process excludes Canberra Health Services and schools' budgets, which are subject to separate processes.

The prioritisation process is designed to assist agencies with workload management and to constrain growth in employee and non-employee expenditure through creating capacity to re-prioritise effort to areas of higher priority. This is not about reducing the size of the ACT public service. Prioritisation will be a multiyear exercise requiring agencies to consider how they can align expenditure with government priorities and statutory obligations, whilst maintaining a sustainable growth trajectory. The results of assessments will inform discussions on relative priorities as well as decisions on future resource allocation.

The government is continuing to invest in a robust public service that meets the expectations of the Canberra community. While we are seeking to constrain the growth in expenses, we have not gone down the path of austerity. We are not cutting the public service. Indeed, the ACT public service continues to grow each year over the forward estimates. This budget includes \$2.95 million over two years, fully offset, to continue to enhance three work streams in the Office of Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety related to whole-of-government employment conditions and governance frameworks.

This initiative includes investment in the team that implements the government's secure employment framework. The team works with colleagues across the ACT public service to systematically review the employment arrangements of public sector employees who have been hired on a casual or fixed-term basis to assess whether they can be converted to permanent employment. So far, nearly 3½ thousand public service employees have been converted to permanent employment, not only providing them with the benefits of secure work but also reducing the cost of churn associated with ongoing short-term employment arrangements.

This budget supports the public service to complete its review of employee classifications. A public service classification informs the work they do and the pay they receive. This budget also recognises the importance of attracting talent into the public service. The budget funds the work required to ensure that the recruitment management system remains robust.

The government has recently commenced bargaining with public servants through their unions and non-union representatives for the next round of enterprise agreements. We look forward to continuing this process in good faith.

Canberrans understand the importance and value of public service and public servants. Canberrans voted to re-elect a government that supports secure public service jobs, and this budget continues to deliver on that commitment. I commend it to the Assembly.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Superannuation Provision Account—Part 1.8.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Digital Canberra—Part 1.9.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (11.17): I was considering not speaking on this one, but I think it is very important to note that there are important shifts happening in the way the government handles digital projects in the ACT.

The ACT does not have a particularly great record when it comes to IT projects. Mr Speaker, you have only to look back across recent history to see examples such as the HR system that did not go entirely to plan, presided over by the current Treasurer. We saw a massive increase in the amount of spending on that system and, eventually, the abandonment of that system in favour of spending even more to get essentially the same system that we already had.

It is not without some concern that we reflect that this is not the only IT project that has gone wrong, either. In the health sector, we have seen a project that, while well intentioned, has clearly not proceeded as the government set out at the outset. We have deep concerns about the way IT is progressing. We have deep concerns about the amount of money that we have seen spent on IT, when it probably could have been better spent on other projects. It could have gone directly to frontline services, if those projects had not gone off the rails and not resulted in the massive overspends that we have seen.

I wanted to note that concern. We will be watching progress on Digital Canberra very closely.

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (11.19): I would like to speak to this budget item, mostly out of interest, but also as someone who led the Department of Home Affairs response to the digital identity legislation by the then Digital Transformation Agency.

On 1 July 2025, as part of the machinery-of-government changes, a new agency, Digital Canberra, was established with the stated purpose of supporting a connected, inclusive and safe digital Canberra. I suspect that the government was left with no choice about doing something in the information technology space, given its woeful track record on delivering IT systems, from failed human resource systems to the dramas we have seen with MyWay+, and through to botched health management systems. I do not need to labour the point that ACT Labor has no idea how to deliver large, complex projects and has had a muddle-through approach.

The Canberra Liberals are fully supportive of improving the quality of digital technology in the ACT. Our membership recently agreed to the policy that we will

explore IT developments to replicate the outstanding Service NSW app. We hope that Digital Canberra can help to get these systems back on track. I note that far too many processes of the ACT government are still paper based, such as public housing applications and the firearms register, and far too many systems are not fully integrated.

Poorly developed systems and lack of integration are significant frustrations for Canberrans, meaning they must provide the same information over and over again. For individuals under duress and in distress, this requirement to keep telling your story to prove who you are is traumatic and undermines confidence in government services. This results in service silos and inefficiencies.

Poorly designed and disconnected systems frustrate the efforts of government and the community to understand trends and to use data to inform decision-making. I would expect that one of the first acts of this new directorate should be to review its ACT Government Technology Directions, which are the technology investment guidelines for ACT government directorates. I am concerned that the current objectives list has reusing technology before investing in new solutions and consolidating legacy systems into endorsed platforms to improve services as its first two priorities. This does not seem to me to be providing an appropriately optimistic vision for the digital future that Canberrans aspire to.

Those of us on this side we will be watching the development of Digital Canberra with considerable interest, in the hope that it will shepherd in a new age of digital sophistication to support the delivery of government services.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (11.22): I am pleased to speak to the Digital Canberra part of the budget. This new agency will work to all ministers on projects across government. However, as Minister for the Public Service, I have overarching responsibility for the agency and whole-of-government technology policy and strategy.

The establishment of Digital Canberra is a significant opportunity to deliver service improvements for the Canberra community, achieve efficiencies for the ACT public service and address challenges like the rising complexity of technology in a consistent way across government.

The first milestone in establishing Digital Canberra occurred on 1 July 2025, with the bringing together of Digital, Data and Technology Solutions—DDTS—from the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate and the Digital Solutions Division—DSD—from the former ACT Health Directorate. Extensive consultation is currently underway across government to plan for the next phase of Digital Canberra's establishment, with full operation expected to be in place by 1 July 2026.

A dedicated agency focused on digital technology and investment will ensure projects with technology components and technology operations and service delivery will be managed and supported by the area of the public service with specialised expertise. The operation of Digital Canberra will have parallels to the rigorous and highly successful project management model in use by Infrastructure Canberra, while also recognising the high level of engagement and ongoing collaboration that is required to ensure

people, processes and technology are working together to deliver outcomes.

Digital Canberra will continue the work of the former DDTS area to strengthen government decision-making for technology investment. Specifically, Digital Canberra will work to establish a whole-of-government understanding of technology and data needs and capability. This will assist government to deliver its priorities for the community through a more strategic approach to technology investment.

It is anticipated that the outcomes from the establishment of Digital Canberra will include strengthening ACT government technology solutions to deliver better services for the community by embedding best practice approaches to planning and design, enhancing project management capability and investing in reliable, standardised, efficient and secure digital systems.

We also expect to improve how technology and data resources are utilised to deliver better services for the community. We will be seeking better value for money and more transparent costs from technology investments, and efficiencies in the way the ACT public service works, which will enable redeployment of human resources to meet new priorities or emerging challenges.

Digital Canberra will work, and is working, in partnership with directorates to ensure digital initiatives are aligned with the government's priorities and deliver outcomes that meet the expectations of the government and the community. The decision to establish Digital Canberra included a commitment to a staged establishment process to ensure a smooth transition and time for extensive engagement with staff, and careful integration of systems, teams and capabilities.

This budget funds some of the work already underway within the previous DDTS to deliver this improved technology for the ACT government and the Canberra community. This includes continuing our investment to deliver the Payroll Capability and Human Resources Management program, PC-HRM. The PC-HRM program was established in 2023-24 to improve payroll capability and human resource management by addressing the most important elements of human resource capability—payroll, rostering time and attendance.

The program is planned to achieve completion in 2027-28. This initiative provides access to funds provisioned through the 2023-24 budget and also provides further clarity on the program's remaining costs and details of anticipated efficiencies. The total cost of the PC-HRM program remains within the original funding envelope approved under the 2023-24 "investing in payroll capability and human resource management" budget initiative.

We are also continuing to uplift the whole-of-government digital services with an investment of \$20.64 million, partially offset over two years. This initiative will enable government to undertake renewal of ICT assets informed by the Strategic Asset Management Plan. The SAMP outlines the necessary investments and priority works to maintain the ACT government's technology assets and provides a long-term and cost-effective strategy for asset management based on current and future conditions and associated risks. This initiative provides for prioritised replacement of critical, major and significant ICT assets identified in the first iteration of the SAMP over the next 12

months. This initiative also enables the government to continue the development of a modularised whole-of-government enterprise resource planning solution to operate existing finance, health inventory and procurement management systems.

Building on the 2024-25 budget, through which government funded the initial planning and design stages of a whole-of-government ERP solution, this initiative will progress further planning and design work by reviewing existing processes and data. It will also establish a core program team to oversee finalisation of the ERP strategy and develop the approach to market for a program partner.

Finally, this initiative will uplift whole-of-government cybersecurity resilience and advance compliance with the Security of Critical Infrastructure Act 2018, or SOCI Act, from the commonwealth, particularly for the health technology environment. Funding provided through this initiative will uplift capability and capacity of the ACT government to detect and respond to cybersecurity threats, including continuing work to address legacy technology risk and enhanced incident response capabilities. It will strengthen the security posture of the health technology environment through continued implementation of protective security controls, as required under the act.

Ongoing investment in cybersecurity is imperative in order to protect government systems and the community's data. The ACT community and businesses have high standards for what they expect from their government when it comes to the protection of personal data, and safeguarding this is of paramount importance given the sensitivity and nature of the data held. This initiative aims to increase cybersecurity maturity for the ACT government by strengthening its security posture and builds on recent government actions in this area, including the 2024-25 budget initiative: "Securing our Information and Data for the Future".

This budget provides further support to our digital health capabilities in improving patient centred care and supports our workforce to deliver care more effectively and safely when and where it is needed. This initiative supports 24/7 support requirements, costs associated with maintaining legacy systems and higher than projected health service growth, and extends support for Digital Health Record hardware for two years.

Contrary to the ongoing commentary of those opposite and some on the crossbench, the Digital Health Record has realised transformational change across the health system and supports the delivery of high-quality patient care, aligning with best practice. It is more than just a digital version of a person's clinical chart. The Digital Health Record, using Epic, has revolutionised the way person centred care is delivered by providing healthcare professionals with a holistic view of the patient, providing high-quality clinical decision support and activating patients to participate in their own health care, particularly through MyDHR. We have more to do—there is always more to do—but we have an incredibly strong platform that has received compliments from clinicians, other jurisdictions and within our own community. We know our community has high expectations for service delivery. We also know that there are efficiencies and opportunities in further developing the technology in our public service. The establishment of Digital Canberra and the investments in this budget demonstrate the government's commitment to a modern, secure technology environment that delivers accessible digital services to our community. I commend this element of the budget to the Assembly.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Housing ACT—Part 1.10.

MS BERRY (Ginninderra—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Minister for Homes and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (11.31): I am talking today about how this budget continues to deliver on housing affordability, homelessness support and planning reform. This budget includes more than \$145 million in housing initiatives to ensure that Canberra can have access to safe, secure and affordable housing.

As members will know, land release is a critical piece of this puzzle for housing supply in the ACT. This year's Housing Supply and Land Release Program features sites for more than 25,000 new residential dwellings between now and 2029-30. This includes releases in Gungahlin, Belconnen, Molonglo, Tuggeranong and Woden, which will bring even more vitality to these wonderful places. It also includes new suburbs like Kenny, Jacka, Bandler and Sulman, which I am excited to soon see come to life. I am also proud to say that, in this financial year, this includes a target of 20 per cent for community, public and affordable housing: 58 public housing dwellings, 239 community housing dwellings and 55 affordable housing dwellings.

Madam Assistant Speaker Ms Barry, I think you will agree that essential workers need to be able to afford to live near employment or great public transport. In fact, everyone should be able to live near the services and amenities that are important to them, even if they are not on big salaries. Alternatively, they should also have the option to live elsewhere in our beautiful town, just like the rest of us. That is why this government continues to invest in affordable housing.

Build-to-Rent is one of the ways we are looking at doing this. On its own, it is not the solution—none of this work is—but each project plays an important part in addressing housing affordability and availability for Canberrans. That is why the ACT government is incentivising the private sector to develop Build-to-Rent with incentives—for example, through lease variation charge concessions, as well as subsidies for 25 per cent of foregone rent revenue. The ACT government is also supporting community housing providers to develop affordable rentals. That is another way that the government is bringing more homes to the people who need them.

In this budget, the Affordable Housing Project Fund has been increased by \$20 million, bringing that fund to \$100 million in total. This fund is expected to support some 800—yes; you heard that right—affordable dwellings in the coming years. This is significant. I am so happy see these homes being delivered by our community housing partners to add to the increasing supply.

Another way the government is increasing affordable rental housing stock in the city is through the innovative Affordable Community Housing Land Tax Exemption Scheme. This scheme gives landlords an exemption from land tax if they rent their home at an affordable rate through a community housing provider. In this budget, the government has increased the cap on the scheme from 250 homes to 1,000 homes. I take this opportunity to put the call out again to landlords with a social conscience to take up this

opportunity and play a part in contributing to affordable rental supply. I acknowledge those who are already participating in that. That will mean the potential for more than 750,000 households to be in homes that they can afford. This cohort is important because they might not actually qualify for public housing but still might be struggling with housing stress in the private market. This program is important to people like them.

Members will also be aware that the ACT government's public housing portfolio stock number was 11,873 at 30 June 2025. By 2030, the government has committed to that stock number hitting at least 13,200. This budget includes funding to plan exactly how the extra thousand dwellings or so will be delivered. We are looking closely at how to balance competing priorities, like accessible design and sustainability features, and make sure we continue to salt and pepper across our city with the growing demand for public housing.

In the meantime, we are still going full steam ahead with the Growing and Renewing public housing program. In fact, at last count we were 397 dwellings off the 1,400 target of new or renewed homes. More than 200 of those are already in the construction pipeline. That is not to mention the 85 social housing dwellings we are building with the support of the commonwealth's Housing Australia Future Fund or the 58 social housing dwellings enabled by the Social Housing Accelerator Fund. I am proud of what the ACT government has achieved so far. There is so much more to do. I acknowledge and am thankful for the partnerships with people in our community and the government who are helping us to achieve these outcomes.

The government is also investing heavily in homelessness services. This ensures that there are safety nets for everyone. The wraparound services and emergency accommodation, as well as long-term housing pathways, are all part of the government's plan to leave no-one behind. This budget has secured funding for frontline providers, which include MacKillop House, Axial Housing, Ainslie Lodge and the Early Morning Centre. There is funding worth more than \$5 million over four years. It is important work to support people in our community who need it most.

Additionally, \$3.4 million has been allocated to support emergency accommodation. This includes hotel brokerage, as well as a pilot program using hard-to-let or underused ACT housing properties for emergency housing. This is important because it is not just single men or women who find themselves in a crisis; sometimes it is parents with children and pets who need somewhere safe for the family to stay together, or it might be someone who has particular accessibility needs. Progressive approaches like this pilot program help us ensure that there are options for everyone when they need them.

On top of this, there is also \$1.8 million over four years in this budget for wraparound services at crisis and transitional housing programs for women and children escaping domestic violence, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. I am pleased to share that a local Aboriginal community controlled organisation is leading this work. It is something we aspired to for some time, and I am happy that it is finally occurring.

This government has also demonstrated how much it values the essential work of the community services sector through a community sector funding boost. That represents more than \$11 million in funding over three years. I look forward to continuing our

work with the community services sector to ensure that people in our community are supported.

In conclusion, this budget is about making sure that, as Canberra grows, it grows fairly—that every person has the chance to thrive, and that having a home is not a barrier but a platform for a good life. Only an ACT Labor government can do this.

I commend this section of the budget to the Assembly.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (11.38): This is a budget speech, so I am going to begin by talking about money. We have to stop viewing housing through a short-term financial lens. Yes, it is going to be expensive to build the amount of new community, public and private housing that we need over the next 10 years. But just wait till you see how expensive it is going to be over the next 20 years, if we do not build it.

What kind of legacy of massive spending are we setting up for the future by our failure to take bold and urgent action right now? As an aside, if this question reminds you of the new climate report the federal government finally released, that is not a coincidence. In so many areas, governments of various stripes are simply not recognising the need for bold spending now in order to avoid dramatically greater spending in years to come, after those who are in power have conveniently left office. One might make the same observation about the justice space.

But back to the context of housing: how much do you think it is going to cost down the track to cater for the complex needs of someone who has first experienced sustained housing insecurity before they have even started school? How does someone successfully apply for a job? A job means they can support themselves and make a positive contribution to our city. How does someone see through a course of study when they have no place to shower, no place to hang their clothes, nowhere to enjoy a safe, uninterrupted night's sleep? How many more people will fall victim to substance abuse issues, mental health struggles, relationship breakdowns, poor employment prospects, physical ailments, or any combination of those things, largely because they are unable to find a secure roof over their head?

How much does it already cost to address the social costs of homelessness and insecure housing, and how much more will it cost in years to come? We need housing first. We know it works. Finland, of course, provides the most obvious proof of concept. Their Housing First strategy is actively saving money, compared to the additional costs of social services, policing, health care and other expenditures that arise from significant numbers of people having no stable accommodation.

Yes, some people are hard to help. Perhaps they live with complex mental health conditions or addiction. They need housing first. Some people have simply had a bit of bad luck and will quickly get back on their feet. They need housing first. Some families break up and leave a parent and children in dire need of a new safe place to live. Those families need housing first. Some people get older, lose a breadwinning partner, find that their fixed income does not go as far as it used to. They also need housing first.

We used to know how to do this. I believe we can do it again. There seems to be a whatever-it-takes mentality that is missing now. Where did that go? Where is the

territory-building ambition? Many Canberrans—and it is often a fond reflection that people have—remember all those guvies built in the 1960s and 70s to house the public service, moving here from Sydney and Melbourne. What if the governments of the day had simply left it up to the private market? What if they had said, “Oh, we don’t have enough cash for that. Hopefully someone will step in—maybe a super fund or something like that.” In 2025 is our imagination as Canberrans really limited to a new sports stadium or an entertainment pavilion? We should get that ambition back. The people who really built this city understood that having housing first is the most important thing we can do.

How do we do that? The Greens, of course, have some ideas. You might have heard some of them before, but they do bear repeating. As we discussed yesterday, we would start by stopping giving \$8 million to the horseracing industry every year. Imagine what we could do with that money just to start with, and then that very valuable parcel of land so close to the centre of Canberra. The Greens have imagined it, and I do invite anyone to look at our ideas on that.

Next, let’s not ditch the Rent Relief Fund. Imagine if the 1,400 vulnerable households helped by this so far had not been able to maintain their tenancy. Where would they be now? How much more would it have cost the government, community organisations and private citizens to deal with the fallout and pick up the pieces?

Another option: let’s provide more funding to Canberra’s peak housing advocacy organisation, ACT Shelter, as the peak housing body in the ACT. It is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that provides advocacy and strategic advice on systemic housing issues in the territory, with a focus on factors affecting the ability of people of low, moderate or no income to have a home that is a safe, secure, appropriate and affordable place to be. They are a critical peak body that are chronically underfunded. An effective and properly resourced body to represent those who support people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, is needed if we are to meet Canberra’s housing challenges.

We could build a community housing project in Belconnen’s town centre and create 60 high-quality buildings for families in need. We could push through well-thought-out changes to Airbnb regulations and strata titles to take more pressure off, to free housing up for those people who live in our city, who are often the backbone of our workforce. Let’s employ more staff in Housing ACT to actually provide some of the supports that are needed and not just have the occasional inspection for important safety reasons—we learned in this year’s budget estimates of a declining number of contacts with tenants each year.

We could bring more functions in-house. We need investment in new public housing to make inroads into the lengthy housing waitlists. The priority housing list for people sleeping on the street or fleeing domestic violence had an average waiting time of 148 days—nearly five months—on 30 June. Think about that. You are the victim of domestic abuse, and you have to wait almost half a year to receive alternative accommodation. What are your options? I think we all can contemplate those options, and none of them are good.

We need greater investment in repairs and maintenance of public housing stock. As

MLAs, and I am one of them that does this, we have to advocate for so many people who are dealing with roadblock after roadblock with their housing properties, their pleas for help being ignored until lawyers—like the good people from Canberra Community Law—or members of this place get involved. People should not need an advocate to navigate the systems intended to support them.

I know of housing clients who are told to contact Canberra Community Law when they need repairs, because the program will not do it, and they need to get a community lawyer to support them to make the case to get these works done. One elderly man could see the sky through his bathroom roof for years and years. One mother did not even have a stove at her property to cook for her family. The mould—oh, the stories about how many tenants have breathed in mould for years! And members have talked about this in this place before; I am not unique in bringing this issue up. People literally being made unwell because of their government-provided shelter is really just mind-boggling.

The examples I just gave were all First Nations Canberrans—that I am aware of—who have provided these examples to me and my team. We know from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were almost 10 times more likely to seek support from specialist homelessness services in 2023-24. The Productivity Commission said nearly half of these people were persistently homeless, meaning the ACT has the highest rate of persistently homeless First Nations people in the country. The government is failing Canberrans in housing stress and at risk of homelessness, and they are, statistically, more First Nations Canberrans than not.

Back to my list of suggestions on how we address this. Let's get serious about raising the revenue we need to fund some of these ideas so that we can reverse the widening gap between rich and poor, a gap that has been widening not just in Canberra but across the country and all over the world. I will reach for a global and historical perspective for a moment, because this is not just about housing, it is not just about the ACT, and it is not just about here and now. Low levels of economic inequality are not simply a nice-to-have. Historically, an ever-widening gap between rich and poor has been a reliable predictor of societal collapse. Globally, the current wealth gap is, by some measurements, the widest it has ever been.

Historian and military strategist, Dr Albert Palazzo, in his recent book *The Big Fix*—and I would recommend this read for anyone interested in national security, climate change and defence—points to high levels of social cohesion as a vital ingredient in determining how successfully a given population will withstand the national security threat of a climate-disrupted future. And of course, with the recent release of the National Climate Risk Assessment, that climate-disrupted future has been laid bare for all of us to see. There is no claim of ignorance anymore. That report, with its scenarios of 1.5, two and three degrees, all of which are plausible if we do not act quickly enough to cut our emissions, lays bare the threats in a climate-disrupted future. (*Second speaking period taken.*)

How socially cohesive will the ACT be in the future if the housing crisis continues to worsen and generates significant cohorts of people who have spent years, if not decades, in housing stress? We need solutions. We need more dwellings for the ever-increasing number of people waiting to be housed. Can we adopt some of the high-quality modular

and prefabricated housing methods used in Scandinavian countries to build places more quickly? What about tiny homes? I cannot help but observe that when Australia has been at war, we have been able to do this sort of stuff, to take bold steps forward, but we do not seem to be able to do it when we are at peace.

I do not have all the answers; I am sure I do not. And I am sure some of the things I have suggested today, if they went through a rigorous discussion, may not prove to be exactly the right things for the ACT. But I cannot help feeling that having the answers is a step we are never going to get to if we do not start asking the question in a more urgent way and if we do not state the problem as starkly as we would if it were us that did not know where we were going to sleep tonight; if it were us who had to help strip the bedding off the couch and put away the camp beds every morning because we had our sister and her three kids living with us since last November; if it were us who could not leave an abusive partner because we simply did not have anywhere else to go; and if it were us who had to choose between covering the rent increase and having the heating on.

A budget does not just make plain what a government's priorities are. It makes plain what the government thinks is possible. The government does not seem to think we are going to get out of our current housing crisis any time soon. This budget, and the decisions that sit around it, suggest that the government is happy with applying band-aids, when what is actually needed is major surgery.

Last week the Greens succeeded in the campaign to make housing a human right in the ACT. As I said in the debate, it has been discussed in this territory for many years. And it is certainly part of the solution. But the reality is that without a government that puts its money where its mouth is and actually builds homes, we are not going to get all the way. We need housing first. We need to commit to this as a principle and then do the work of imagination, policymaking, legislative change, budgeting and leadership to make this happen.

That is why we put forward a fully costed proposal at last year's election to have a bold vision, over 10 years, to build the homes, not to solely rely on the federal government and say, "We're going to wait to get the money from the feds." We put forward the view that we had to commit as the ACT, as the territory, to spend some of our own money on this. We think that remains the right way to go, and that is why I have made these remarks today.

The minister has outlined a range of initiatives that are being provided in the budget, and they are welcomed for what they are. But what they do not represent is the step change that is clearly needed to address some of the issues that I have outlined in my remarks today. That is certainly something we will continue to press for in this place.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (11.52): In this place, we all know—we talk about it often—that our housing system is broken. For anyone without generational wealth, without a high income or is not already securely housed, it is vital that we revisit the social housing model. As Mr Rattenbury has indicated, we need to take a housing first approach in how we think about investing in housing for those who are unable to access the private housing market.

I have sympathy for Housing ACT. They are operating in a public trading enterprise, which means that, in many respects, they are required to wash their own faces to generate revenue sufficient to cover their expenses. Despite some funding, capital injections and additional recurrent funding here and there, the reality is that it is very difficult for them to cover the spread.

Here are some figures. In 2024, Housing ACT generated, in total sales of services from contracts with customers—in other words, from rent—\$99.5 million. Market rent would have netted Housing ACT \$236.4 million. So they are earning 42 per cent of market rent, which is what we want them to do. It is subsidised housing. The point is to offer housing at a rate lower than what the private market offers. But someone has to cover that spread. For too long, our system, at the territory level but also federally, has not had a clear mechanism for actually covering that spread. As a consequence, we see perverse outcomes.

There is little choice for Housing ACT. They have to liquidate the one asset they have access to, which is people's homes, and move people from centrally located areas to outer suburbs, where there are fewer services and fewer education and employment opportunities. This is logical under the system. This is the choice that needs to be made. Of course, government decisions lead to that choice or, in fact, prescribe that choice. Is this really what we want for people in the ACT who cannot otherwise access housing? Is this creating the outcomes that we want? Do we have an opportunity to, instead, look at a different approach to the one that we have adopted?

This model is confusing to me. Housing ACT paid the ACT government \$25 million in rates in 2024-25 and had total expenses of \$319 million. So 7.8 per cent of the expenditure of the government housing provider went to the government. There is some coverage in their funding arrangements indexation, with 3.75 per cent for rates, but will that be sufficient to cover the consequences of this budget's rates increases, including the new health levy? I am not sure it will.

Because of the system that we have, public housing, as a proportion of total housing dwellings in the ACT, has declined since self-government from 12.2 per cent to 5.7 per cent. We know this is not enough. In this place, we have spoken frequently about public housing waiting lists and the people who are not able to access a home for themselves in our community because the proportion is not enough. I was glad that the government acknowledged that and agreed in our negotiations after the election to commit to increasing the proportion of public and community housing, which has been in decline since self-government. That is what we need to do to see that level of ambition in future budgets. It is welcome to see some investment here, but we need enough to address the gaps that we have.

It is hard to see this happening, though, for as long as we continue viewing housing, whether it is in the private market or in the public and community housing sector, primarily as an asset. It is necessary social infrastructure. We do not approach things like schools and hospitals in same way, where there is an expectation that they will generate revenue sufficient to cover the spread. Someone has to pay for the subsidised housing. We need to take a different approach over the long term that sets us in a different direction.

My concern is that, unless we do, we will continue to have budgets like this, with announcements of some additional housing, but we all know, and the minister has acknowledged it herself, it is not enough to address the waitlists that we see in our community. This is a conversation about what we want for the future of our city and whether we want this to be a place where everyone has a safe place to sleep. I welcome further conversations about that and consideration being given to serious reform that moves us away from the system that has put us in the situation that we are in.

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (11.57): I too rise to speak to this budget item. I have been the Canberra Liberals' shadow minister for public housing and homelessness for only a few months, but I have been astonished by the number of representations and issues raised with me and my office relating to problems with the delivery of housing programs. I would say that the requests for intervention we receive take about 80 per cent of our work time. That is huge.

We in the Canberra Liberals recognise the importance of public housing. In the words of Liberal elder Sir Robert Menzies, in 1954 he said: "Provision of homes is not a matter of charity. It is a matter of national development and social justice, and one to which this government attaches the greatest priority." It is from this position that I agree with the views of ACT Shelter—that the budget lacks the ambition and skill required to address the housing affordability crisis here in the ACT. I am very disappointed at many aspects of the management of public housing in the ACT as reflected in this budget.

I should say that the Canberra Liberals' highest priority is that the government has policies that enable sufficient and affordable private housing. We see the current problem as a supply shortage problem and consider that this is largely the result of restrictive government policy settings, such as limitations to land and the high cost of land, the imposition of costly and time-consuming planning approval processes, and the imposition of high fees, taxes and charges, such as the lease variation charge.

There are several things the government could do to deliver housing supply and housing affordability. Sadly, though, nothing in this budget inspires confidence in that regard. Having targets that deliver thousands of homes seem great, but delivery is woeful because ACT Labor is not prepared to address the underlying issue, because this would require it to backtrack on its own legislative and policy imposts. So, unfortunately, many Canberrans will be looking to public housing as a solution under this government.

In that context, we are concerned about the lengthy delays for Canberrans on the waiting lists for housing. The waitlists are increasing, not decreasing. The wait time of many, many years for housing is simply unacceptable. We are concerned that the policies are increasing the number of vulnerable Canberrans having to couch surf or sleep rough. Enforcement action to move people on from homelessness encampments in Civic may look like progress, but, unless durable solutions for vulnerable people are found, it may just be taking a solution that is already bad and making it worse.

There is a strong case for investing in comprehensive service mapping and gap analysis of homelessness services in the ACT. Despite significant need, there are a clear and persistent gaps in service coverage, including for young people, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and those with complex support needs.

The current system remains heavily focused on crisis response, negating the need to increase investment in any intervention, prevention and long-term housing pathways.

I have reflected on the difficult choices individuals are forced to make who do not have access to safe housing options. I fear that some people are forced to remain in violent or abusive relationships because of the lack of housing options. I fear that some people are subject to exploitation and sexual abuse just to maintain a roof over their head. These are weak choices that leave people exposed to mental health risk. Housing uncertainty places people at increased risk of needing health and mental health intervention. It places them at risk of risky behaviours, including drug use and criminality.

Recent data shows that 4.8 per cent of ACT tenancies surveyed were at risk. Sixty-nine per cent of property managers identified rental arrears as the main reason for tenancies at risk in the ACT. That is a significantly damning percentage. The decision by the Labor government to kill the Rent Relief scheme, despite near universal support for its continuation, is a real indictment on the quality of Labor's decision-making. This shortsighted decision means that supports that had been made available to help people facing a short-term health or employment problem to stay in their rental property, preventing the crisis of homelessness and the associated costs to the ACT budget, is a real blow on the community. As I mentioned yesterday, I welcome the minister's comments on the revitalisation of what I call Rent Relief 2.0. I am looking forward to seeing what the design and implementation looks like.

The property industry has advised that housing managers have been experiencing concerns over the loss of vital support for tenants experiencing financial stress and that 77.8 per cent of housing managers have referred tenants in the ACT to support services. That percentage is well above the national referral rate.

As I indicated earlier, I have been surprised by the number of complaints I have received about public housing maintenance. It is crystal clear that ACT Labor has not made sufficient allowance for maintenance, with some residents waiting years for urgent repairs to be done. One case particularly sticks out in my mind. A resident's flat flooded every time it rained, causing endemic black mould issues. For years, she tried to get ACT Housing to act, with no result.

I am very concerned about the consequence of the budget decision to reduce client services visits. While I agree with the decision to do multiple-officer visits for safety reasons, I am concerned that the decision to do this within an existing budget envelope means that client visits will move from roughly one visit per year to one visit every two years. Client services visits include routine inspections and checking conducted by Housing ACT to ensure properties are maintained and public housing tenants are supported. It is a way to keep an eye on our public assets. These visits are a key part of Housing ACT's role as a landlord and allow staff to see the condition of the property, address maintenance issues, check on the tenant's wellbeing, address any support needs and ensure tenants are aware of their tenancy obligation and responsibilities. While the safety of Housing ACT staff should not be compromised, there is a risk that the dynamic reduction in visits may impact on support provided to public housing tenants and the responsiveness of Housing ACT to maintenance issues. I would encourage Housing ACT and the minister to review this decision and consider whether a more nuanced

approach would be appropriate to manage risk.

I note that Labor continues to seek to progress its ideologically-driven insourcing agenda and will be looking at expanding this to housing maintenance. We will be monitoring this closely as we fear this will be insufficient and more costly. There is a fundamental difference between those on this side and Labor. Labor believes in government having a role in all aspects of life, whereas our view is that government should not be in the business of competing with the private sector to deliver services.

I share ACT Shelter's disappointment that the 2025-26 ACT budget did not include additional funding for maintenance, modifications and repairs to public housing. While budgets in previous years have allocated funding for repairs and maintenance, it was anticipated that additional funding would be allocated in subsequent budgets, given the substantial backlog of essential maintenance and accessibility upgrades.

Additionally, this year's budget provided no additional funding to the Justice Housing Program or other housing supports for people exiting the Alexander Maconochie Centre, despite the clear and urgent need for such a program. There is great risk that people will reoffend and return to the criminal justice system, fuelling cycles of incarceration, homelessness and compounding disadvantage. There is currently no funding allocated for the Justice Housing Program beyond 2025-26.

I am also very concerned that the budget fails to restore additional funding to ACT Shelter, placing the future of the organisation at risk. One wonders about Labor's motivations. ACT Shelter is a well-regarded and effective advocate for housing and homelessness. *(Second speaking period taken.)*

We can hope that the government's decision not to fund it was not an attempt to eliminate dissenting voices from its budget message: "Don't worry. There's no problem. We have everything under control." I will be looking to see which organisations the government funds to contribute to policy on housing, which we know is desperately needed.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (12.08): I also wish to speak on the importance of the future of public housing in the ACT. In the 2025-26 budget, the ACT government reaffirmed its commitment to delivering 30,000 new homes by 2030, including 5,000 social and affordable homes. This is a commendable and ambitious goal and it reflects the growing recognition of the urgent need for secure, affordable housing across our territory.

As part of this commitment the government has set the target of building at least 1,000 new public housing dwellings, with the aim of increasing the public housing stock to 13,200 homes by 2030. To meet this target, nearly 1,400 additional homes must be added to the current portfolio, a significant undertaking that will require sustained effort and investment. I repeat: the government needs to prioritise investment in public housing.

Under the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program, the Auditor-General found that Housing ACT's management and administration of the sale and purchase of public housing homes in the general property market has not been fully effective. There has

been inconsistent policy and procedural guidance and communication has been poor. In the absence of clear direction, officers have adopted varied approaches to market valuations and approvals, leading to inefficiencies and uncertainty. While the minister said they were planning the new stock, it is another example of planning that should have been done by now. We need to invest in housing, not just sell off the existing housing and hope that we increase our numbers.

There remains a substantial backlog of essential maintenance and accessibility upgrades, the result of decades of underinvestment. Many tenants continue to live in homes that are in poor condition or that do not meet their mobility and health needs. This ongoing neglect not only undermines the wellbeing of tenants but also risks further deterioration of public assets, leading to greater long-term costs for government and taxpayers alike.

If we are serious about building a fair and inclusive society, we must ensure that our public housing system is not only expanded but also properly maintained and managed. With the number of people homeless and on the public housing waiting list, how is this a progressive government? I urge the government to address these shortcomings with urgency and to ensure that our public housing system is equipped to meet the needs of all Canberrans now and into the future.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (12.10): I will just rise briefly, because I have already spoken today about the cost of bad budgeting, and I do not think there are many areas where the costs become more clear or more human than in housing. The housing services provided by the ACT government have been criticised for a long time now, including by former Chief Minister Jon Stanhope, who has repeatedly put out the information that the number of ACT public houses, of units, has gone backwards—that there were fewer units than 12 years ago. The state of public housing in the ACT is terrible. I recognise the comments by Mr Rattenbury and, again, by Ms Barry about the experience that people are facing in public housing.

When I was born, when I was born in Woden Valley Hospital, my parents brought me home to a public house in Kambah. They were not desperately poor. They were not at that super high level of need, but they were able to afford then to live in a public house, and they were able to build on that so that they could find their feet and purchase the home. That helped to set up a future where they could get ahead, where I could get ahead and where my sister could get ahead. The value of that is not insignificant.

The fact that we are seeing it become more and more difficult for people in Canberra to access housing is deeply concerning. It is one of the clear costs of seeing this budget go backwards for so long, seeing money diverted for pet projects and seeing narrative take the place of a clear, concise fact-based budget. It is not fun to stand around and talk about deficits and budget line items. We do not do this because we take some sort of pleasure in it. We do it because it has real-world impacts, and we can see it very, very clearly when it comes to housing in Canberra.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Debate (on motion by **Ms Cheyne**) adjourned to a later hour.

Sitting suspended from 12.13 to 2.00 pm.

Questions without notice

Canberra Health Services—colonoscopy waiting lists

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, I refer to the recent media coverage of a patient who waited four months for a referral for colonoscopy treatment. Why are Canberrans waiting so long for important colonoscopy surgery in the ACT?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Castley for the question. It is very frustrating, and I know that it is really distressing for people when they are waiting for a colonoscopy or an endoscopy of another kind. We are working really hard to try to bring those waitlists down. This is a longstanding problem and a challenge across other jurisdictions, as was made clear in the article as well. That is partly as a result of things like the expansion of the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program and decisions made at the national level, without waiting for states and territories to have invested in the capacity to support that prior to those expansions. Of course, screening is really important, and we encourage people to undertake that.

I am pleased to say that the investments we have been making in expanded capacity and throughput, for example, the \$3.749 million investment that we made in the 2024-25 budget, did see an additional more than 2,090 endoscopies performed in that financial year. Overall, between April 2023 and September 2025, the waitlist for endoscopy and gastroenterology has decreased from 9,822 to 5,841 orders for procedures. That represents a 40 per cent reduction in the overall waitlist due to the continued investment by the ACT government. As of 23 September this year, the procedural waitlist comprises, as I said, 5,841, with 4,858 patients ready for care, of whom 85 per cent have a residential address in the ACT. There is a lot of work going on in relation to this matter, and we are taking it seriously.

MS CASTLEY: The patient ended up being treated in the private system within two weeks, costing \$4,000. Minister, is the strategy of delaying treatment and forcing patients to use private treatment your way to reduce some health expenses?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No, that is not the case. A lot of work is underway to ensure that people who are referred to public gastroenterology and endoscopy services can be seen in a timely way. This problem has obviously evolved over some time, and it was impacted by COVID-19 as well. It is also impacted by capacity and capability in the southern New South Wales region. We have worked, for example, with Queanbeyan hospital to refer endoscopies to Queanbeyan hospital. But my understanding, from a conversation earlier this week, is that the outpatient appointments that relate to those procedures still need to occur in the ACT.

We opened a new endoscopy procedure room at North Canberra Hospital last year. We are investing in the redevelopment of endoscopy suites at Canberra Hospital, in the old theatre complex in building 12, and we have continued to invest through our budgets in expanded capacity. Recognising the need to continue to expand access, the 2025-26 ACT budget provided \$16.9 million over four years to continue to deliver expanded endoscopy services at Canberra Health Services—recognising that the current situation

is not acceptable and does need to be addressed.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, why do you not collect data on waiting times for colonoscopy treatment?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Clearly, we do, because the waiting times were included in the article. It is true that we do not routinely publish outpatient wait time data. I do not think any jurisdiction does. There is no nationally comparable standard for outpatient or endoscopy procedural waiting times and waitlist data. Clearly, we do capture that information, because it was in the article that Ms Castley referred to in her first question.

Building—property developer licensing scheme

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development. According to a *Canberra Times* article on 18 September, several Canberra based developers now exclusively undertake work across the border in New South Wales, because they feel it is easier to work there. With the ACT's developer licensing also coming in now, what is the government doing to actually make it easier for developers to undertake work here?

MR STEEL: By allowing them to do more, through the major planning reforms that we have underway—such as the missing middle planning reforms that will allow for missing middle homes, which were previously banned from being built on most residential blocks in Canberra, and also through other planning reforms that are in the works, including the one that I announced earlier this week for the inner north and Gateway Corridor, to allow for more homes as part of the ambitious target of 30,000 homes to be built by 2030. Of course, we are also working with the construction industry on our productivity agenda, which is looking at streamlining both the planning and the building systems to make it easier to build more homes sooner. But, as we do so and allow the construction industry to build more homes, it is really important that we do not compromise on quality. I think Canberrans have had a gutful of dodgy development in this city, and that is why the Assembly supported the Property Developers Act, which is now being implemented. It is critical that it is in place as consumer protection, because it is far more expensive to fix defects after they occur than to prevent them in the first place.

MS CASTLEY: Is the government aware of the extent to which developers based in Canberra are exclusively undertaking work in New South Wales?

MR STEEL: I am not aware of the number, but I will say this: if property developer licensing results in dodgy developers not working in the ACT, then that is a good thing.

MR HANSON: Minister, are you calling developers who work outside the ACT because of high costs dodgy?

MR STEEL: No.

Mr Hanson interjecting—

Planning—Age-Friendly City Plan

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the minister for seniors. Minister, when will the government's next Age-Friendly City Plan be published?

MS ORR: As I have said many times in estimates hearings and other forums, we continue to work through that and look at the options as to whether we will go with the next Age-Friendly City Plan.

MS CASTLE Y: Minister, will the plan include specific, quantifiable targets, outcomes and delivery milestones, or will it be another set of vague actions, like the last plan?

MS ORR: In answering the question, I cannot really pre-empt what is going into a plan that is still under development and to be written, and I also reject the premise of Ms Castley's question—or the implication of Ms Castley's question—that previous plans have not been robust enough, as I would paraphrase it. I think there have been plenty of actions there, and it has been shown—through reports, through the updates that have been done and through the monitoring framework that is there—that they have been measured and have led to outcomes. I think Ms Castley is taking a little bit of Liberal licence with the way she presented that.

MR HANSON: Minister, has the government dedicated any new resourcing to achieving the plan's aspirations?

MS ORR: I believe Mr Hanson is talking about the plan that has been replaced, which we provided through our reporting to date, our annual reporting. As to what actions have been done and what has been taken across government, obviously, to do that, you would require resourcing—someone has to do it.

School funding—teacher out-of-pocket costs

MR HANSON: My question is to the minister for education. Minister, amongst school budget pressures, the AEU stated in their annual budget submission for this year that:

...88% of teachers currently pay for teaching resources out of their own pocket, spending an average of \$744 per year.

Minister, why are Canberra teachers having to pay for Labor's underfunding?

MS BERRY: Thank you. I do not agree with the premise of the question on teacher's paying for it because schools are underfunded. Schools are funded in the ACT with the highest funding levels in the country.

What I would say is that teachers do purchase other items to provide more supports to their students because they care deeply about their students education and the health and wellbeing of young people. I would say, however, that there is no requirement for teachers to purchase items outside those supplied by the school. I know that this is an enormous frustration of the Australian Education Union and for me to say to teachers that there is no requirement for you to purchase additional items to do your job. All of those items that are required to provide an education should be provided by the school and through the Education Directorate's budget.

MR HANSON: Minister, if all the items required to teach are being provided, why is it that teachers are going out and spending \$744 a year?

MS BERRY: Thank you. The only thing I can put it down to is their commitment to their students and to the education of school students within their care and responsibility. It is a challenging area because I know that teachers deeply care about their students and want to supplement the products that are provided by our schools to provide a good quality education, but they are not required to.

Mr Hanson interjecting—

MS BERRY: They do it because they feel like they need to, but there is no requirement to. So my message to school teachers in the ACT is there is no requirement for you to supplement education supplies. If you are requiring more or if you are not having the right equipment that you need to do your work, then you should speak to your school and therefore the Education Directorate.

MS CASTLEY: Has the government assessed how widespread the problem is in ACT public schools and the impact it has on education outcomes?

MS BERRY: Well, the Education Union has clearly done that work and have said that there is a significant number of teachers that are purchasing out of their own pocket. I share the frustrations of the Education Union that that is something that their members do, but it is not a requirement. It is not something that is asked of them or directed by the Education Directorate or others. Again, if it is an issue, if they see that they are needing to supplement, then they really should speak to their school principal through their own budget and through the Education Directorate through its budget, if more equipment or supplies are required for them to deliver a high-quality education in our schools.

Roads safety—self-driving vehicle technology

MR RATTENBURY: My question is to the minister for road safety. Minister, reports indicate Tesla has recently updated software in its vehicles in Australia to activate full self-driving (supervised) technology. Has the ACT been involved in preparations for this transition, and are there any issues with the ACT's road transport legislation raised by this new technology?

MS CHEYNE: I regret that I do not have the answer in front of me, so I will take that on notice. I will try to come back quickly.

MR RATTENBURY: Are there any insurance implications arising from the use of this technology in the ACT?

MS CHEYNE: I am not going to guess, so I will also take that on notice.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, what work has been done to ascertain whether autonomous vehicles can read our ACT road signage and markings and whether this highlights a need to work across states and territories to harmonise those signs and

markings?

MS CHEYNE: I know that there has been work. I simply do not have anything more than that in front of me, so I will take the detail on notice and come back fulsomely.

Youth—Youth Justice Strategy

MR EMERSON: My question is for the Minister for Children, Youth and Families.

The previous 10-year Blueprint for Youth Justice expired at the end of 2022, and the development of a new youth justice strategy was referenced as a key priority under the Community Service Directorate's key strategic and operational priorities for September 2022 to October 2024; however, it does not seem to have been completed. In today's response to last year's Healthy Centre Review of Bimberi, you stated that the ACT government will work collaboratively to develop an ACT youth justice strategic plan.

Minister, why is it taking the government this long to commit to start developing a new strategic plan for youth justice after the expiry of the previous blueprint three years ago?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. I am not going to speculate on the decision-making of government at that moment in time. That strategy lapsed. I think it is a very wise thing that this government recommits itself to a new youth justice strategy, which is what we are doing.

MR EMERSON: Minister, when will this work begin, and what is the anticipated completion date for the strategic plan?

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you, Mr Emerson, for the question. I, of course, will not announce executive policy in advance. I will, however, indicate to the chamber that that work is already underway, and we are seeking to engage and consult with stakeholders and the wider community imminently.

MS CARRICK: Minister, when will you finalise a detailed timeline for the development of this strategic plan, and will it be made publicly available?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Ms Carrick for the question. I am not sure I am in a position at this time to indicate the timeline that we are working to. This is still quite early work. Whilst that work has begun to occur, we are still needing to begin consultation before we can even seek to finalise and have in place a strategy. This is a priority of the government, so I do seek to advance this work as quickly as I can, and I will seek to update members as appropriate, when information becomes available that I can share.

Mr Emerson: A point of order, quickly, on responsiveness. The question Ms Carrick asked was whether that timeline would be made publicly available.

MR SPEAKER: So your point of order is on relevance?

Mr Emerson: It is on responsiveness to the question, under the new standing order.

MR SPEAKER: So under standing order 118AA you are asserting that the minister has not been responsive to the question?

Mr Emerson: Not to that portion of the question.

MR PETTERSSON: I am happy to provide that information. At this point in time, there is not a timeline; a strategy has not gone through cabinet processes yet. What I have said is that when that information becomes available, I will update members—

Mr Cocks: A point of order. The time expired for the question, by the looks of it.

MR SPEAKER: I do not believe that Mr Pettersson actually used his full time. I know the clock has been reset, but I have often given ministers the opportunity to stand back up, with time remaining on the clock. I understand that the clock has been reset, but he did not use his full two minutes, Mr Cocks, I assure you.

Mr Pettersson: I think I answered it twice, to be honest.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Emerson, we will review. I think he has probably answered the question in that bit as well, so I do not think there will be anything to see here.

Tuggeranong ice sports facility

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation, and it is about the proposed new ice sports facility in Tuggeranong.

It is my understanding that, in response to a 2018 expression of interest process for a new ice sports facility, the developers ultimately chosen for this project submitted five possible sites which they had assessed as being suitable for such a facility, yet the government decided to offer the site on Rowland Rees Crescent in Greenway, which had not been considered by the developers. The developers have now clearly indicated that they are no longer interested in developing the Tuggeranong site. Minister, what other sites did the directorate consider before deciding on Rowland Rees Crescent? What consideration was given to upgrading the existing facility?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Carrick for her question and her interest in the ice rink that was committed to by the Labor Party some years ago. I know it has been a cause of frustration for the community.

Mr Hanson interjecting—

MS BERRY: It is very frustrating that it has taken this long to get the developer to the table and to commit to developing on this site. The commitment and promise to deliver on this piece of land in Tuggeranong were made in consultation with the Canberra community, including the ice rink user groups. Their preference was that it should be on the south side, and that the site that was identified in Tuggeranong was their preferred site.

We are still, again, waiting for the developer to confirm with us, so it is not true to say that they have said they will not develop on this site. We are still waiting for them to

confirm that commitment that we have made, and that is for the piece of land that has been identified. That was the piece of land that went through the expression of interest process for the developer, who agreed at the time when they went through the process that that was where the ice rink would be built.

The frustrating thing about this is the length of time, and that is something on which we have been trying to speed up the developer proponents. We are in the last stage of that process, and we hope to get more information out to the community, or at least some certainty to the community, that the developer is still going to maintain their commitment which they expressed during the expression of interest process. I will also be providing an update to the Assembly tomorrow, so if there is any information that I have missed today, I can include that in my update.

MS CARRICK: Minister, what criteria did you use to form the basis of the decision to locate the ice facility in Tuggeranong?

MS BERRY: I think I answered that, in answer to the first question—in close consultation with the community, it was decided that a new ice rink would be built on the south side, and the commitment was made for the facility to be built in Tuggeranong. A piece of land was identified that would be suitable and was of the appropriate size to build a twin-sheet, Olympic-size ice rink facility in the ACT.

The Phillip rink, as Ms Carrick will know, is a privately owned rink. Whilst the developer and owner of that rink could have decided at the time that they wanted to upgrade that rink, they instead decided to sell it to another developer, who is now going on with their work, which I know Ms Carrick is also frustrated and unhappy about. We are trying to fill the gap that that process has left, by providing a twin-sheet facility, Olympic size, so that all ice rink users can have access to the ice rinks equally. It is so that they can have equal access to time on the ice rink, not just individual user groups, and it is so that it will meet the needs of our city going forward.

MR EMERSON: Minister, will the government consider the old Woden Valley high school on the corner of Hindmarsh Drive and Ainsworth Street in Phillip as a potential site for this new facility, given its central location and good transport connections? If not, why not?

MS BERRY: No, we will not, because that site of the old Woden CIT has been identified for a future high school, which I think the community would all agree is more important for that area than a replacement ice rink. The site was identified, as I said, with significant consultation, and that was the site that was agreed to. That was the site that we promised. That is the site that we are committed to.

Lakes and waterways—Ginninderra falls

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water. Minister, an FOI reveals that, in February, you approved not one but two big water releases to help a Netflix movie crew film at Ginninderra Falls. I understand that this approval happened despite the concerns raised by the City and Environment Directorate about water quality, fish deaths and amenity. Reports from people who visited the site after the Netflix was there said that they did not even clean

up after themselves, with tape, rubbish and sandbags left at the site. Briefs included in the FOI showed there was uncertainty as to the legality of the water release. Minister, what follow-up and due diligence have you done to ensure that those water releases were within the bounds of your powers under the Water Act?

MS ORR: A lot of advice was put to me. It was a quite novel situation. Advice was updated as the request and the issues went on. As to the question on the follow-up that was done, I asked the directorate to ensure that there was monitoring and also meetings around lessons learnt, given that it was a novel situation, and to follow up on any further considerations. I can take the substance of the question on notice as a range of areas across government worked on this. For completeness, I will see whether there is anything further to add.

MISS NUTTALL: What ecological assessments were undertaken at Lake Ginninderra following the water releases to determine the impacts on habitat quality and species living in the lake? What did those ecological assessments show?

MS ORR: Again, I will take the detail of that on notice.

MS CLAY: Minister, did anyone in the directorate do follow-up inspections at Ginninderra Falls to assess the condition of the site that the film crew left it in?

MS ORR: I will take that on notice, noting that Ginninderra Falls is in New South Wales, and it is not necessarily under our jurisdiction.

Emergency services—ACT Ambulance Service

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. The ABC recently reported that for several hours in a week the ACT Ambulance Service had only four stretched vehicles in operation. The Transport Workers Union said low staffing, which led to the shortage, is “far too common an occurrence”. Minister, why has the government let staffing levels deteriorate to such an extent that at times we have less than half of the ideal number of stretched ambulances on the road?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. Firstly, I want to assure that the Canberra community can have full confidence in our ACT Ambulance Service. They go above and beyond every single day and night to attend to people in great times of need.

There has been a significant issue with staffing levels, particularly on certain days, over the last few weeks. This is occurring because of unplanned leave and getting new recruits, who also need to be supervised, up and running—so extra supervision and that kind of thing. There is a whole raft of measures.

On Monday, I was briefed by the Chief Officer about what they are doing very proactively to ensure that there is the appropriate number of ambulances on our roads when needed.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, what impact is the staffing shortfall having on patient care but also on ambulance officer morale and wellbeing?

DR PATERSON: I was assured in the briefing that this has had no impact on patient care and that all response times have been within the scope. The Chief Officer said that there had been one particular night where staffing was short and that they reviewed all the incidents that night, and he assured me that they had appropriate response times. We are always working to support our ACT Ambulance Service, and we will continue to do that.

MR HANSON: Minister, when will enough staff be recruited and trained to meet the shortfall on an ongoing basis?

DR PATERSON: At the end of this week, I think a whole recruit college will have completed their initial training and will go off into the field. They will require supervision and support over the next year or so to complete their training. There is also recruitment underway for next year's colleges, and we have had a significant response to the call for recruits. We also have lateral recruitment happening from other jurisdictions.

The new roster for the ACT Ambulance Service commenced in April last year. This is looked on by paramedics in other jurisdictions as a very beneficial roster in terms of work-life balance for our paramedics. We are also recruiting from other jurisdictions. Canberra is a very good place to live, so we welcome ambulance recruitment from all over Australia.

Budget—apprenticeships

MS TOUGH: My question is to the Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations. Minister, what support is provided to apprentices under this budget to ensure we are developing the skills we need to support Canberra's economy?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Tough for the question. This budget recognises the central role that apprentices play in building the skills we need for Canberra's growing economy. This role is especially critical in our building and construction sector. Research by BuildSkills Australia, the national job and skills council for the construction sector, has identified that we are facing a shortage of 300,000 construction workers nationally by 2028. That is why we are providing a \$250 cost-of-living payment to eligible apprentices and trainees in the ACT, as well as an additional \$250 to first-year apprentices to help with the purchase of tools and equipment as they are starting out on their apprentice journey.

We are also increasing User Choice subsidies across essential qualifications in the building and construction sector to 90 per cent of the efficient price. This \$18 million investment is designed to help businesses take on an apprentice or trainee with funding available year round. For a business that might not have considered bringing on an apprentice this might just be the difference.

MS TOUGH: Minister, what kind of trades are supported by this increase to 90 per cent subsidy funding?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary question. The ACT

government first introduced the 90 per cent subsidy to electrician apprentices in the previous budget. We have seen over 350 apprentices access it for their Certificate III in Electrotechnology since its introduction. We have now expanded it to cover six other critical construction trades. This includes carpentry, plumbing, bricklaying, wall and floor tiling, roof plumbing and air conditioning apprenticeships, all critical to construction in ACT. To illustrate, a full-fee plumbing apprenticeship at CIT would cost around \$24,000, but with our User Choice subsidy this fee is only \$2,100.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how will this expansion of User Choice funding support the supply of housing to the ACT?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for his supplementary question. By providing a 90 per cent subsidy to training in these seven essential building and construction trades, we are enabling businesses to bring on more apprentices. In doing this, we are directly boosting our construction workforce, ensuring the pipeline of qualified trades workers is secured as apprentices progress through their training. Initiatives like this one will ensure our construction workforce continues to have the skills needed to ensure the government meets its target of 30,000 more homes by 2030.

Waste—single-use plastics

MS CLAY: My question is to the minister for environment.

Minister, South Australia's ban on soy sauce fish came into force this month. Small soy sauce fish have a high chance of becoming litter, running off into our waterways and causing real harm to our birds, fish and wildlife that mistake them for food. They are not recyclable now, and the new recycling facility that we are spending almost \$300 million on will not recycle them either. They are on our national list of problematic plastics being considered for a ban. Will you consider banning soy sauce fish containers?

MS ORR: The government has a commitment to look at the next phase of single-use plastics and what we may consider banning. We will work through that commitment and, in consultation with the community, determine the options in due course.

MS CLAY: Minister, are you considering a ban for other problematic plastics that are already identified in the national roadmap, like bread tags, takeaway cups, food containers and fruit stickers?

MS ORR: Mr Speaker, I refer the member to my previous answer.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, can you indicate to the Assembly the timeline for the next problematic-plastics ban?

MS ORR: I will come back with a timeline once the government has had an opportunity to go through its processes and make its considerations.

MR SPEAKER: Can I just be clear. Are you taking that question on notice, or are you saying that you will answer it at some stage in the future?

MS ORR: At some stage in the future.

Ms Clay: Mr Speaker, on standing order 118AA, the question was is the government or minister considering bans for soy sauce fish containers, bread tags, takeaway food containers and fruit stickers—specific items. The answer was just “There is a process underway”. I am not certain. Has that answered the question?

MR SPEAKER: I am not sure whether it has or it has not. Together with my friend the Clerk, we will review *Hansard*; I will take that as a 118AA, and we will have a look at it.

Crime rates

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Police. In *Region* on 12 September, the Minister is quoted as saying: “While data shows crime rates in the ACT are decreasing, we take every feeling of insecurity seriously.” The most recent report from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on crime rates shows that offences per 100,000 ACT residents aged 10 years and over have risen by eight per cent since 2020-21. In particular, acts intended to cause injury have increased by 31 per cent.

Minister, do you acknowledge that increasing crime rates in recent years are not a feeling but a reality?

DR PATERSON: Long-term trends suggest that crime rates are decreasing significantly across the board in the ACT. What the ABS statistics that were released on 3 September show is that there was a decreasing trend for five out of nine categories of victim types. Long-term trends showed victims of the following crime categories recorded decrease: kidnapping/abduction; blackmail/extortion; unlawful entry with intent; motor vehicle theft; and other theft. There were increases in other crime categories like assault, sexual assault and robbery.

This is something that I have been very consistent on: we will constantly see changes and dynamic movement in crime types in the ACT. Ten years ago, motor vehicle theft might have been the most compelling crime category in the ACT, whereas at the moment we are seeing really steep increases in domestic, family and sexual violence, which is why ACT police have established the family violence unit within ACT Policing. It is also why the last budget supported a new sexual assault and child abuse team, SACAT, and it is why we are responding to specific crime types and specific crime needs.

In terms of youth crime, we are seeing a decrease in youth crime in the ACT. We will continue to work with our colleagues. We have seen the implementation of the raising of the age of criminal responsibility, so ACT police are responding to young people and children, who may be coming in contact with the justice system, in a different way.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, what actions have the government taken to address the significant rise in criminal acts intended to cause injury?

DR PATERSON: We are continuing to support ACT Policing. There has been significant investment in the budget to see more ACT police on our roads and out and

about in our community. They are proactively out there supporting the community and responding to crime.

MS BARRY: Minister, what actions have the government taken to address the 33 per cent rise in the rate of unlawful entry with intent since the 2020-2021 financial year?

DR PATERSON: I will take that as a question on notice, as to the specific crime type and as to what ACT police are doing to address that.

Arts—funding

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries. During the 2024 election, ACT Labor promised more funding for artists and arts communities. However, the 2025-26 budget papers revealed that headline funding for arts will decrease by \$3.3 million. Minister, what funding cuts is the government making to the arts to achieve this \$3.3 million decrease?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Milligan for the question. I will take the specific question on notice. The government is proud that, in this budget, we have increased arts community funding by 50 per cent. The ACT government supports our local arts community with a range of different funding initiatives. The funding that is provided through artsACT and appropriately summarised across government on the artsACT website is a useful tool—I direct all members to it—to get a sense of the full scale of funding that the ACT government provides to the arts community.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, why has the government chosen to reduce its support for local arts communities by making these cuts?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Milligan for the question. I am not sure that I accept the premise of the question. The support that we provide to the Canberra arts community is broad and it is strong, as evidenced by election commitments and funding announcements in this budget. I will take the question on notice. I am curious to understand Mr Milligan's question further.

MS BARRY: Minister, does the government expect the ACT arts industry to decline due to this decreased support?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Barry for the question. I am not sure that I accept the premise of the question. I am not sure about the specific measures that they are referring to. This government intends to continue investing in arts in the ACT. That is well evidenced. There is a strong breadth of actions and activities that this government is undertaking to support and invest in the arts. That is well evidenced. Once again I will take the question on notice, to better contemplate the specific provisions made in the budget.

Active travel—William Hovell Drive

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, last week, in response to my questions about the William Hovell Drive off-road path between Coulter Drive and Bindubi Street, you mentioned, "There is a lot

still to occur in that area between William Hovell Drive and, effectively, the Aranda bushlands and the Arboretum and then into Bandler and Sulman” as to reasons why this was not included in the scope of work. Minister, can you please explain what is happening there and why this precludes work on a three-metre wide off-road path, but the works for the road duplication can still continue?

MS CHEYNE: Yes; I can. This relates to a motion that Mr Cocks or Mr Hanson—maybe both—brought forward earlier this year regarding congestion and the studies that the government was undertaking around road usage, and particularly what the future looks like as it relates to William Hovell Drive, the Tuggeranong Parkway, the Glenloch Interchange, the Parkway Drive Connector, or the east-west arterial, and Bindubi Street, together with John Gorton Drive. I think any observer would note that there is a stack of work underway for the release of land in Sulman and Bandler in time. We also know that we need to do some work on the intersection of Bindubi Street and William Hovell Drive to ensure that we get to the point where the capacity for what the road is handling can occur. I note that the duplication that we are talking about effectively occurs from the point that Mr Braddock is referring to. We already have duplicated roads, but we do not want to have some boarded works if we can avoid them. It is not that we cannot proceed at the same time; it is that it is all related. That is what we are taking into account.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, why is the road duplication able to proceed but not the path? Even if they are related, I do not understand the difference between those two points.

MS CHEYNE: I genuinely believe I have answered the question, but, if I am able to provide further detail in a more coherent manner, I certainly will.

MS CLAY: Minister, is it the government’s intent for the path to be built during this term?

MS CHEYNE: As far as I am aware, yes.

Housing—Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Homes and New Suburbs. Minister, can you tell me how many public housing properties have been completed through the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for his question. I am pleased to share with the Assembly that 1,003 dwellings have been filled or bought through the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program to date. This includes building 794 dwellings and purchasing 209 dwellings. The growth and renewal program aims to deliver 1,400 new homes by 2026-27, comprising 1,000 properties to replace existing end-of-use properties and at least 400 properties to grow the portfolio. As at 30 June 2025, the public housing portfolio stock number was 11,873, above the baseline of 11,704, the number that the program started on.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how many households were allocated public housing homes in 2024-25?

MS BERRY: Thank you for the supplementary. I am happy to confirm that 657 Canberrans or Canberra families were allocated safe, secure and affordable public housing homes in the 2024-25 financial year.

MS TOUGH: Minister, how many new public housing homes are in the pipeline right now?

MS BERRY: I thank the member for the supplementary. As of 30 June 2025, a further 212 homes are currently under construction, 18 homes are in design and planning for the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program, not to mention the 85 dwellings the ACT government will build using the Housing Australia Future Fund round 2 funding and 55 dwellings funded by the Social Housing Accelerator Program—17 of which have already been delivered.

Mr Barr: Further questions can be placed on the notice paper.

Birthday greetings

MS CHEYNE: Mr Speaker, with your indulgence, it is my solemn duty to inform the chamber and anyone who cannot see your fetching badge that you are officially older. While there was consideration of debating an urgent motion regarding whether 59 is late middle age or early vintage, we were not able to agree to the form of words. There was also some consideration of suspending any heckling for 24 hours, but some of us just could not bring themselves to agree. With that, Mr Speaker, we have been able to unite behind a giant card. So, on behalf of your staff, who were delightfully conspiratorial, and on behalf of this chamber, we wish you a very happy birthday.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you. I will have a read. I am sure it is wonderful. I hope there are amendments from Mr Emerson in there.

Papers

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

Freedom of Information Act, pursuant to section 110—The journey to pro-disclosure: Statutory Review of the Freedom of Information Act 2016 (ACT), prepared by Proximity for JACS Directorate, dated 27 August 2025, together with a copy of tabling statement, dated September 2025.

Thriving Kids foundational support program

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (2.49): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) the Commonwealth is making significant changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) with a specific objective of reducing the growth in the scheme;

- (b) there have been several attempts to establish a roadmap for the implementation of these reforms, but processes have been delayed, deferred and remain uncertain;
 - (c) the Commonwealth Government has recently announced the “Thriving Kids” scheme without prior consultation with the ACT Government;
- (2) further notes that:
- (a) in a ministerial statement delivered on 2 September 2025, Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services acknowledged that the announcement raised many questions and a want for more detail. Further, the statement acknowledged that the lack of detail has caused a level of uncertainty, particularly for NDIS participants and their carers and loved ones;
 - (b) the costs to the ACT are uncertain but will be substantial given the Commonwealth’s proposed two billion dollar allocation and the 50/50 funding split;
 - (c) uncertainty and lack of detail from Federal Labor around the future of Foundational Supports and the lack of transparency from ACT Labor on its negotiations and plans has resulted in several NDIS service providers pulling out of the ACT or closing, with indications that more providers may close;
 - (d) disability advocates have expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clarity on progress of the plan and implementation of Foundational Supports and seek greater involvement in the development of this policy;
 - (e) parents of neurodivergent children remain concerned about the implementation of Foundational Supports and the “Thriving Kids” initiative, particularly the risk that it would deny children supports that are needed. They seek information on the assessment criteria and supports that will be available;
 - (f) given the importance of supports for vulnerable children and the uncertainty created by delays and lack of adequate consultation with the disability sector, the Assembly considers it important that an accountability framework be established to ensure that developments and planning can be appropriately scrutinised; and
- (3) calls on the ACT Government to:
- (a) set out its plan for the implementation of Foundational Supports, including “Thriving Kids”. The plan should also include:
 - (i) a roadmap setting out the timeframes for consideration and decision making;
 - (ii) the process for consultation with people with disability, disability service providers, carers and family members; and
 - (iii) clear objectives, guiding principles and constraints to shape the design and delivery of Foundational Supports, including the “Thriving Kids” initiative, in the ACT; and
 - (b) provide bi-annual updates to the Assembly on the planning and implementation arrangements for Foundational Supports, including “Thriving Kids”, setting out:
 - (i) projected costings and impacts on current and forward budgets;

- (ii) progress against planning milestones, consultation commitments, and outcome targets;
- (iii) Government decisions and policy directions arising from the planning process;
- (iv) evidence of safeguards, such as research, quality assurance, and evaluation mechanisms, demonstrating that reforms are achieving the intended improvements and avoiding unintended harm; and
- (v) details of the assessment criteria and what supports will be provided.

In moving this motion, I would first of all like to thank all parties that have been involved in the negotiations. I was hoping for a consensus agreement across the board, but unfortunately we did not get there.

I particularly want to thank the Greens and officers in that space for their constructive comments and feedback on the motion. I would note that the motion also includes most of their amendments as well. I also want to thank the minister's office for engaging. Like I said, unfortunately we did not get there, but I do appreciate the collaboration and the conversations.

In bringing this motion, I seek to provide assurance that the ACT Legislative Assembly is aware of the significant impacts that the proposed foundational supports would have on the lives of our children and young people and would closely scrutinise the changes to ensure the best outcomes. Unfortunately, it appears that my approach has been seen as one of weakness. Labor foreshadowed it would seek to amend my motion, and has done so, to cut out the very core of my motion—essentially, to cut out any responsibility. I think this is poor form, as Labor seeks to hide from accountability and transparency in such important matters.

I do not, for one second, think that these are easy negotiations. They are difficult negotiation. There is a lot of detail that needs to go into those negotiations. However, my motion recognises that the changes to the NDIS are being driven by the commonwealth. My motion recognises that these changes were first announced in 2023: that foundational supports delivered, through states and territories, education settings that would replace eligibility for the NDIS for some people and would be co-funded fifty-fifty by the commonwealth and states and territories.

My motion recognises the great uncertainty that has arisen among parents and families about these changes, particularly as the stated objective of the changes is to save money. Parents have told me that they fear that the changes will result in substantially worse outcomes for our children. Educators have told me that they fear that the burden of providing supports will fall to them, creating further barriers to the ability to deliver quality education by creating another administrative burden.

NDIS support providers have told me that they fear the consequences of poorly designed change will affect the viability of their businesses. Stakeholders and service providers have told me that they fear a repeat of what happened during the implementation of the NDIS, where a provider from interstate was brought into the ACT to deliver a program.

Everyone I speak to tells me that the lack of information and clarity on the proposed changes is deeply unsettling and that, because of the uncertainty, current NDIS participants are nervous. They are anxious. These are already very vulnerable cohorts of people. Certainty is what they need, especially in these uncertain times. In her ministerial statement on 2 September 2025, Minister Orr acknowledged that the announcement raised many questions and a want for more detail. Minister Orr also acknowledged that the lack of detail has caused a level of uncertainty, particularly for NDIS participants, their carers and loved ones.

My motion seeks to address those concerns by providing a framework for the provision of information and scrutiny by this Assembly. My motion seeks to ensure that this is not one of those things that is put in the too-hard basket and then, at the last minute, a substandard implementation plan is rolled out, achieving nothing and putting our most vulnerable in even worse outcomes. My motion seeks to ensure that we all have our eyes on the ball and we do not miss the changes that we know are coming.

In bringing forward this motion, I recognise that there may not yet be answers to many of these questions and concerns. I recognise that there are ongoing negotiations with the commonwealth about the design and funding of foundational supports and the newly announced Thriving Kids proposal. I also recognise that these negotiations, appropriately, need to be conducted in confidence, as the negotiation positions taken by the ACT cabinet must also appropriately be kept confidential. My motion does not seek to compromise these negotiations or positions.

What my motion seeks to do is simple: it is to provide assurance to parents, educators and service providers that this Assembly is aware of their concerns and will establish a framework of biannual review of the progress of implementation of foundational supports in the ACT. My motion is essentially an accountability measure that ensures that, every six months, the minister will make a statement to this Assembly to provide an update on the progress of decision-making on and implementation of foundational supports. The update will provide the opportunity to consider the progress and to ask questions of the government about the implications of decisions being made.

Labor would have you believe that the foundational support changes are entirely the responsibility of the commonwealth. That is simply not true. Foundational supports related to learning or development delays will be delivered largely in the ACT schools. Educators and learning support teams may have a role in identification, assessment, planning and reporting, which may go far further than their current obligations. Foundational supports such as occupational therapy or psychology may be delivered through ACT Health. The Child and Youth Protection Service and the Therapeutic Support Panel may need to engage to ensure continuity of support. There will be financial implications for the ACT budget, particularly in the long term, as the commonwealth has only committed funding for the first four years.

We are keen to hear this Labor government's plan and how it sees any role for the private sector in delivering foundational supports. We hope the government will see a role for many professional individuals and organisations already working in this space. My motion calls on the government to commit to transparency as these levels of detail are being considered. Canberrans naturally expect that their government will be across the detail, advocating strongly for their position. The Canberra Liberals will be

disappointed if this is not already happening.

Clearly, my colleagues on the other side and their mates at the commonwealth level have fumbled the ball badly on the NDIS changes. The delays, the lack of information, the absence of consultation, the backtracking and the surprise announcements are characterised by their chaotic approach. I anticipate that Labor do not want to be seen to be critical of its commonwealth Labor colleagues, and I appreciate that. However, it was not elected to look after its Labor mates; it was elected to look after the interests of Canberrans—and, sadly, Canberrans always come second in this place.

Given the potential impact of the NDIS changes on vulnerable young people, it is appropriate that this Assembly scrutinise closely the decisions of the ACT government and the decisions it will make to implement these changes. We owe it to those vulnerable Canberrans to ensure that we achieve the best possible outcome for them. We owe it to our educators, our healthcare professionals and private sector organisations that we bring them along and ensure the design of foundational supports is as good as it should be and has appropriate systemic controls and evaluation to ensure its sustainability into the future.

We owe it to all Canberrans to ensure that quality outcomes are being delivered in a fair, equitable and financially responsible manner. As this is budget week, I will also add that we need to explain to Canberrans how we will pay for the additional obligation imposed by the commonwealth now and into the future.

I commend my motion to the Assembly. I note that we will not be supporting either Labor's amendments or Mr Emerson's amendments, but I will speak to those amendments later.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (2.59): Good afternoon, everyone. Today I rise to speak to the Assembly in support of Ms Barry's motion, as the ACT Greens spokesperson for disability. This motion is an important contribution in response to movements from the commonwealth government that will have a lasting impact on Canberrans' and, broadly, our nation's children. It is about essential community-based supports for children who will no longer be eligible for support from the National Disability Insurance Scheme because of the commonwealth government's recent changes.

I would like to thank the people in the Assembly who have been involved in the final wording of the motion. The Barry office, of course, has done a great job in setting this ball in motion, and I think her asks are extremely reasonable. The community really wants more transparency and communication from the ACT government about Foundational Supports and Thriving Kids, and I sincerely hope that this motion can make that happen.

That said, I would also like to give credit to the Emerson and Orr offices. They have raised valid points about what they would rather see this motion do. I appreciate the spirit in which they have undertaken negotiations, and I am sorry that, ultimately, we have not been able to meet on a compromise.

I do not wish to misattribute anything, so please correct me if I am wrong, but I suspect

we all agree that the federal government have dropped the ball a bit, having regard to the amount of information they are providing to us on foundational supports, and we do not intend to put the entire fault for that onto the ACT government. However, in the long term, we support the intent of this motion as it stands to set up a system by which the ACT government will be obliged to give us what little information the federal government provide to them.

Unfortunately, we will not be able to support the proposed amendment from ACT Labor, on the basis that it removes the onus on the ACT to remain accountable for our role in delivering foundational supports, and it would achieve this by removing all of Ms Barry's original calls.

While it does not appear in the budget paper, I appreciate that the minister has reassured us that the \$90 million provisioned by the ACT government in last year's budget for foundational supports remains available. If we are putting that much money towards the provision of foundational supports in the ACT, I think it is pretty reasonable to surmise that the ACT government will play a key role in the provision of such supports.

If we are playing a key role in the provision of those supports, we should be accountable to the public. We should be able to provide timelines and detail the consultation and, ideally, the co-design that we are doing. We are supportive of the ACT government seeking this information from the commonwealth. Indeed, creating our own implementation plan would likely require this information from the commonwealth. If it is the commonwealth that is dragging its feet, we should call that for what it is. But we must be clear and accountable to the community about the ACT's role.

The NDIS has been both a life-changing and necessary reform for hundreds of thousands of Australians, and it was conceived as a safety net for those with a significant and permanent disability. It allows people with disabilities to exercise their rights of choice and control over their plans. We know that, for many people who are autistic and have a developmental delay, the NDIS was not necessarily properly meeting their needs, but at least it provided a system where they had a choice of individualised services.

The NDIS was often the only door to vital services and, as that door is closing for some, families are now left to navigate a fragmented system of limited, underfunded or non-existent supports. These children, through no fault of their own, have been left in a state of uncertainty, often with their development and potential hanging in the balance.

The way I understand it, the federal government's recent announcement of the Thriving Kids program was framed as a positive step towards addressing this gap, but are block-funded programs the right option, or is Thriving Kids simply considering people with developmental delays and who are neurodivergent as a homogenous group and depriving them of control and choice over their own supports? Either way, it is an acknowledgement that a system of foundational supports is not a luxury, but in this political climate it is a necessity for a fair and equitable society.

However, the sad reality is that the announcement of Thriving Kids has sent shockwaves through our community, especially autistic adults and young people and parents of autistic children. Advocacy groups like Advocacy for Inclusion have raised

some pretty valid concerns about whether the program is a budget-cutting measure that is leading to an overall reduction in the quality and choice of support available to children, moving many children from individualised supports to welfare models that aim to “fix” them. Take it from someone who has instinctively learned to mask my ADHD traits to get by in a neurotypical world: oh boy, it can really hurt you in the long run.

Additionally, the source for the \$2 billion that was announced by Minister Butler for the program is still quite unclear. Is this new funding or is it being redirected from the NDIS? Does this mean there will be inconsistent access to services across states and territories based on how much they contribute? If so, how is that equitable? There are so many unanswered questions and a significant lack of transparency for such a short rollout timeline.

The commonwealth government has once again failed to understand that this kind of rushed approach is preventing genuine opportunity to co-design and consult with families and people with lived experience. In turn, this will lead to a program that does not adequately meet the needs of the community. Our children deserve appropriate resources, and they deserve better.

As raised by many advocacy groups, the federal government’s use of terms like “mild to moderate autism” is oversimplifying a complex, lifelong condition or neurotype. Mind you, there is no clinical basis for the term “mild to moderate autism”. It fails to capture the full lived experience of an autistic person and is promoting an outdated, one-size-fits-all approach. It is dividing the autistic community into “mild to moderate” versus “severe”, creating, in essence, a two-tier system where access to crucial therapy, services and government funding is being sanctioned.

As a community, we should be championing inclusivity and working on removing the societal barriers and lack of communication. Instead, the federal government’s framing is placing the responsibility of functioning on the autistic person rather than on society to be more inclusive. I think that this approach of viewing neurodiversity as a disability that needs to be fixed is outdated and exclusionary, and it is not a system that would “enable our children to thrive”.

As with any new program, a great deal of uncertainty remains. Families, carers and service providers are looking to the government not just for promises but for a clear plan. We need reassurance that no child will be left without support, if we are indeed shifting from one system to another. We need reassurance that disability advocates and service providers will be brought along on the journey and understand what is being asked of them by our governments. Most importantly, we need these systems to be co-designed with people with a disability.

This is where the real work begins. To build trust and ensure the success of any kind of foundational supports, we need transparency and clarity. First and foremost, we must see a comprehensive road map. We need to know the clear stages of implementation, the specific services that will be available and a tangible plan for how existing services will be transitioned or scaled up. The community needs to understand the journey from concept to reality so that they can plan and prepare.

Second, the government, including the ACT government, must commit to sharing important program milestones. We cannot wait for sudden announcements. It hurts people when we do. We need regular updates on key achievements, whether it is the finalisation of a co-design process, the projected costs to the ACT government, the estimated timelines from the design phase to implementation, or the establishment of program evaluation mechanisms. This will help to build confidence and allow all our stakeholders actively to participate in the process.

Third, and perhaps most critically, we need robust safeguards to ensure continuity of care. The most common fear I hear among families is that a child's current support will be abruptly cut off before the new one is in place. We are seeing this in practice. People with a disability are having the rug pulled out from under them as their NDIS plans are reassessed and sometimes inexplicably cancelled.

I understand that this is not the intent of the scheme, but given that it is happening to Canberrans, we need to provide an ironclad guarantee that people's needs will continue to be met through transitional periods. It is imperative that we have a mechanism that guarantees a seamless transition and protects against any disruption to a child's development. This includes having clear, accessible information for parents and carers, and an independent appeals process.

Finally, the Thriving Kids program must include clear and ethical reassessment criteria. Given that the government is seeking to moderate the NDIS's growth to eight per cent a year, many children have been reassessed in the past six months and have been determined ineligible. As Thriving Kids is supposed to be a system for children under the age of nine with mild to moderate developmental delays and autism, are those children who are ineligible for the NDIS directly considered for Thriving Kids, or will there be a different set of criteria and a different application process? Although the program was announced to commence from 1 July 2026, those reassessment criteria are still not clear or transparent.

Children's needs can change over time. We must ensure that any child who, over time, is bound to have a more significant and permanent disability can appropriately and easily transition to the NDIS. A child's development is a fluid journey, and our support systems must be flexible enough to reflect that reality.

Given that the commonwealth government has decided to implement Thriving Kids, this initiative will work best when it creates a system that gives every child the best possible start. It should ensure that a child's postcode or their family resources do not determine their future. We should be working with people with lived experiences to co-design and make this vision a reality, not hastily rolling out an ambiguous, inappropriate program. Hence, I am calling on the government to ensure that it is designed and implemented with clarity, compassion and commitment, because our children deserve better.

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) (3.10): The NDIS review identified a harmful disparity between the supports available to people with disability who are NDIS participants and those who are not. The same review

recommended governments design and deliver additional foundational supports for people with disability outside the NDIS in recognition of this disparity. That led to the December 2023 decision, when all Australian governments made a commitment jointly to design and invest in foundational supports.

The disability reform landscape, which includes the foundational supports, the Disability Royal Commission response and other considerations, is a broad one, and all jurisdictions acknowledge the need for road maps to guide the work ahead and ensure people with disability, disability stakeholders, community members and service providers can stay informed about changes that are likely to have an impact on their lives. That is why there is a road map for 2024-25, which was published in September 2024. It outlined the goals and the deliverables under the main themes of the broad disability reform landscape, and it is publicly available on the federal government's website.

I acknowledge there is a need for updating and continuing to provide information as we go forward in this discussion, particularly given recent announcements, such as the commonwealth government's Thriving Kids announcement. State and territory disability ministers have strongly advocated for a transparent and accessible road map to be available for the disability community and providers.

I understand that development of an updated road map is underway. The work is being led by the federal government, in conjunction with states and territories and, as soon as it is endorsed by all jurisdictions, it will be published. The ACT government will continue to work closely with the Australian government and all states and territories to continue to progress these reforms.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge that the disability sector has also seen significant reforms to NDIS pricing structures over the past 18 months, including reforms resulting from the most recent annual pricing review and the revised pricing arrangements and pricing limits, and that this has led to a level of uncertainty, financial pressure and regulatory burden. While uncertainties around the disability reform agenda may be contributing to certain levels of uncertainty and angst, and providers within the ACT are pulling out of particular streams of services or looking at how to reposition the services they are offering, it is predominantly around the pricing structures. That is the feedback coming to me, and that these recent changes are exacerbating the misalignment between the NDIS prices and the actual service costs.

I raise this point in the context of foundational supports and the uncertainty there as to the viability of organisations. There are a number of drivers in what we are doing there, and we are advocating to the NDIS and the federal government to make sure that we are progressing the feedback against all of these drivers, not just focusing on one and ignoring the others.

As I noted in my recent ministerial statement—which has been quoted, I think, a few times now—the announcement of the Thriving Kids program has raised many questions. I acknowledged that there was a lack of detail at the time, and it did cause a level of uncertainty. While I am raising this, having regard to the way my quote has been referenced, the comments that I made in that ministerial statement referred to the commonwealth announcement of a commonwealth-led program, and that it is on the

public record that the commonwealth government did not consult with states and territories and the community prior to making the announcement.

If the chamber has the view that I somehow have more information than anyone else, I am happy to put on the record that the commonwealth has shared the information that they have shared, and I have no further information to share on that one. It has been put, in a little bit of the debate, that we do not necessarily want to come out and criticise our Labor colleagues because we all like to be one big, happy Labor family. While we do like to be one big, happy Labor family, I think every family is allowed to have its disagreements and its differences of opinion. I am happy to put on the record, for what it is worth, that the way Minister Butler made the announcement for Thriving Kids was quite unhelpful.

In the intervening weeks since that announcement, states and territories have continued to work with the Australian government to understand this proposed program and how it will be designed and delivered. It is an important first step in delivering on governments' shared commitment to foundational supports for children aged zero to eight with a need for mild or moderate supports for developmental delay and autism, and their families. It goes to that initial intention of building an ecosystem of supports for children with developmental delays, providing an opportunity for us to rethink how we design and deliver supports for children and their families.

We can draw on best practice and evidence which tell us that children are best supported, in the context of their families and communities, in settings where they also learn, play and socialise—not through extensive individualised therapy sessions. It enables us to provide timely access to supports for children and families early in a child's life, as soon as the need arises, often before diagnosis or formal assessment, which we know can significantly improve outcomes and reduce the need for increased supports later in life.

The Australian government has, as we all know, committed to beginning the rollout of the Thriving Kids program from 1 July 2026, with a gradual scale-up over the first year. It is also indicated that no child will be transitioned away from the NDIS until Thriving Kids services are fully in place. All governments are currently collaborating across health, disability, Treasury and first minister portfolios to understand and settle key issues relating to the implementation of Thriving Kids. This includes eligibility thresholds, delivery settings and funding parameters. I want to assure the Canberra community that the ACT government will continue to advocate for an approach to Thriving Kids which maximises the opportunity to enhance the whole support ecosystem and minimise support gaps to ensure no families miss out. This means making sure that Thriving Kids fits within the broader foundational support ecosystem and leverages the existing service landscape.

All Australian governments are working together to ensure there is a shared understanding of this cohort, their experience and support needs. This work is informing the details of the program, including its planning and design as well as implementation timelines and funding requirements, all of which are still to be worked out. As we work through the development of the parameters of this program, the ACT government will continue to advocate for the needs of our local community and seek to prioritise services that have a local footprint in the ACT, with local expertise and a good understanding of

the ACT context and service landscape.

As I have already committed to do, I will continue to provide ongoing updates to the Assembly and the ACT community as this work progresses and as we move towards a potential future transition. I also look forward to continuing to engage with the ACT disability community on the development of this program and the broader disability reform agenda.

The ACT government is strongly committed to consultation and engagement with the ACT disability community to ensure we understand what they need and expect from disability reforms more generally but also including foundational supports and Thriving Kids. Since the release of the NDIS review and the disability royal commission final report, we have held a range of consultations with the ACT disability community and key stakeholders, including both NDIS and non-NDIS providers, disability advocacy bodies, other community organisations and, of course, people with disability. We have held a roundtables and briefings to discuss key priorities, emerging concerns and the future direction of reform. We have sought to understand what is important to our local community and share as much as we can about the reforms underway.

The Disability Reform Taskforce has also met regularly with key stakeholders, including National Disability Services and the ACT Disability Directed Advocacy Caucus to discuss emerging issues in the community and to seek stakeholders advice and insight to inform the development of the reforms. We also meet regularly with key stakeholders to ensure we understand the day-to-day challenges faced by NDIS participants and providers so we can provide this feedback to the National Disability Insurance Agency. The government has also supported the Australian government to deliver ACT-specific public consultations on foundational supports.

Ensuring voices and lived experience of the ACT disability community underpins the ACT government's response to and implementation of the disability reforms and is central to our approach. We will continue to engage with our local community as we move forward on these reforms, and we expect to have further conversations as the negotiations on key parameters settle so that we are able to have the conversations with the detail.

As part of supporting the ongoing engagement, the most recent ACT budget has committed \$300,000 in new grant funding to support disability reform consultation with community partners. This work will provide important contributions to our evidence base, which will support us to design Thriving Kids, foundational supports and the other broader reforms to make sure that these programs meet the expectations and needs of our community. It is very much in the spirit of "nothing about us without us" and working on co-design with our community.

I would just like to run through a few of the other comments that have been made, specifically around my amendment and Ms Barry's original motion. Ms Barry's motion, as tabled, calls on the ACT government to take responsibility for not only its contribution to the shared reforms but also matters that are within the commonwealth's responsibility and to do this before the agreements that will govern the program have even been made. The concern that we have with Ms Barry's motion as it is is that it is putting the cart before the horse and it would just create more uncertainty and

confusion.

As I said, all governments are currently collaborating across health, disability, Treasury and first minister portfolios to understand and settle key issues related to implementation. As we have been doing in the ACT, the government will continue to advocate for the needs of our local community and seek to prioritise services that have a local footprint in the ACT, making sure that we have our local expertise, a good understanding and that we are supporting our local service landscape.

I think there was a comment made that the amendments that I am proposing will take away—and I paraphrase here—any accountability, essentially, on the ACT government. I must say, I fail to see how that is the case. These amendments clarify the different responsibilities between the two governments and, if you were to compare them side by side, I think you would see that everything is reflected and included. The main difference, being the Thriving Kids program, which is a national program being implemented by the national government, is not something that is our jurisdictional responsibility to speak on behalf of. What we can speak to, what we are very open to speaking to and what is reflected in my amendment is everything that the ACT will be contributing and how we will be working with our community in our contribution to these broader reforms.

I will shortly move the amendment that has been circulated in my name—now that I have had a really good chat about it—so that everyone can see it and it formally gets moved. But, just in closing, it is disappointing that the amendment will not be supported. I do not believe it substantially changes what is being sought—more information—but it does reflect that, as a jurisdiction, we can speak for the ACT and not necessarily for the commonwealth. I move:

Omit all text after “That this Assembly”, substitute:

“(1) notes that:

(a) on 6 December 2023 National Cabinet agreed to Foundational Supports along with a series of parameters to support joint development and implementation;

(b) the Commonwealth is making significant changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) seeking to slow growth of the scheme; and

(c) on 20 August 2025 the Commonwealth announced the “Thriving Kids” program without prior consultation with state and territory governments or the disability community and stated design of the program would be led by the Commonwealth;

(2) further notes that:

(a) service providers have noted the uncertainty around Foundational Supports as well as pricing changes due to National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) pricing reviews is affecting the delivery of services, with providers pulling out of some service streams;

(b) disability advocates have expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clarity and seek greater involvement in planning and implementation;

(c) parents of neurodivergent children remain concerned about the implementation of Foundational Supports and “Thriving Kids”, particularly the risk that it would deny children supports that are needed;

(d) the definition of “mild to moderate developmental delay and autism” remains unclear, and specific assessment and reassessment criteria are yet to be produced; and

(e) in a ministerial statement on 2 September 2025 Minister Orr acknowledged that the announcement caused some uncertainty, particularly for NDIS Participants and their families, carers, and loved ones. Further, the statement acknowledged the lack of detail and provided a commitment to continue to provide updates as work progresses; and

(3) calls on the ACT Government to:

- (a) reaffirm its important role in advocating for Foundational Supports that meet the needs of the Canberra community;
- (b) write to the Commonwealth Government asking it to set out its plan for the implementation of Foundational Supports, including “Thriving Kids” requesting the plan include:
 - (i) timeframes for consideration and decision making;
 - (ii) the process for consultation with people with disability, disability service providers, carers and family members;
 - (iii) projected costings and impacts on current and forward budgets;
 - (iv) planning milestones, consultation commitments, and outcome targets;
 - (v) evidence of safeguards, such as research, quality assurance, and evaluation mechanisms;
 - (vi) any rule changes under the NDIS Act;
 - (vii) details of reassessment and future assessment criteria; and
 - (viii) objectives, guiding principles, and constraints for the design and delivery of Foundational Supports, including “Thriving Kids” in the ACT; and
- (c) provide biannual updates to the Assembly, without prejudicing negotiations with the Commonwealth, regarding the ACT’s contribution to Foundational Supports including:
 - (i) the status of negotiations;
 - (ii) projected costings and budget impacts;
 - (iii) consultation and engagement with the disability community and disability services sector;
 - (iv) policy and program planning and implementation;
 - (v) safeguarding and quality assurance considerations; and
 - (vi) information received from the Commonwealth on the planning and implementation of their contribution to Foundational Supports, including “Thriving Kids”.”.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (3.24): I thank Ms Orr for her amendment and for giving some context to current progress and the negotiations with the commonwealth from her portfolio perspective. As she indicated, running parallel to the work of disability ministers is also the work of health ministers, and Minister Stephen-Smith, I am sure, will touch upon that in due course. As Ms Orr referred to as well, treasurers, through the Council of Federal Financial Relations, are involved in this work. Ultimately, I think the commonwealth’s objective is that, through each of those ministerial streams—disability, health and treasury, an outcome will come forward that

would enable national cabinet to make a decision, a collective decision, on behalf of all states and territories and the commonwealth, ideally by the end of this year.

I think there are a few observations that need to be made at this point from our perspective and then also from the perspective of the states and territories. In listening to the debate so far, some assumptions that both the mover of the motion and Miss Nuttall have been made that are not yet in fact either a state or territory negotiating position or may in fact not end up being how particular services and programs are delivered.

Firstly, it is important to note that there has been a change in the membership of the national cabinet since the decision in December 2023. There have been changes of government at state and territory level and there has also been a number of changes in commonwealth ministers since that time. There is also the question of whether the offer the commonwealth has put forward is in fact consistent with that agreement in 2023. That is still the subject of further discussion and debate. That is being led by the Council of the Australian Federation, which is the peak body of first ministers, the chair of which has also changed and will likely change again from when the initial agreement was set in 2023, through then to now and then into next year. The chair has rotated from South Australia to now Tasmania and will go to Western Australia next year. So we have three different premiers leading the CAF work—and, obviously, the premier this year, Liberal Premier Jeremy Rockliff, has been somewhat distracted by a motion of no confidence in him and then a snap election in Tasmania. We have also, of course, had a federal election intervening, and then, as Ms Orr has indicated, an announcement from the commonwealth of a Thriving Kids program that was a surprise both to first ministers and indeed to disability ministers.

So there are a lot of moving parts here, and assumptions that have been made by colleagues in this debate so far are not necessarily correct. For example, it is open to the commonwealth to design and manage the Thriving Kids program and service. They may wish to have national uniformity in this regard. So their ask of the states and territories may only be a financial contribution, which would be consistent with the 2023 agreement, at least in the financial context, with a capped contribution from states and territories. However, that agreement talked about co-design and working in partnership, but the commonwealth appeared to have moved faster than the states and territories on that matter.

There is then also the question, which we have debated at some length in this place, around the commonwealth's contribution to public hospital funding. Since December 2023, a lot has changed in that regard as well, including, clearly, the costs associated with the commonwealth meeting 42.5 per cent and then, ultimately, 45 per cent of public hospital costs across the nation.

So a lot has changed. There is a lot still to discuss. I think, from nearly 20 years experience, that it will take a lot of work to land this by December of this year. It is possible, but I would not say it is likely at this point. So the context of Ms Barry's motion and the assumptions contained within it about the role the ACT government will play and the role of that might be in the context of, say, a of bilateral arrangement with the commonwealth, as opposed to an all of the states and territories and the commonwealth arrangement, is also yet to be determined.

The ACTs position, for what it is worth, is that we will continue to work closely with our other state and territory colleagues. Our preference would remain a nationally consistent program and agreement across everyone. But I am aware that some states and territories have changed governments since 2023 and now have a different position in relation to these matters than their predecessor governments. So whether there is in fact a consistent submission across all of the states and territories remains to be seen. I will get an initial indication of that at a Council of the Australian Federation meeting later this month.

So, in summary, there are a lot of moving parts. As Ms Orr succinctly summarised, this motion, as it stands, does put the cart before the horse. I suspect that there will be further twists and turns before this matter is resolved. Ms Orr's amendment presents a sensible pathway. It is the only pathway the ACT government can pursue between now and when there might be a decision that the commonwealth could take to unilaterally make the changes that they are proposing to make. They can do that. It would be our preference that they work with the states and territories and that the states and territories can remain a unified group. But that may or may not happen.

The amendment contained within Ms Orr's contribution, which has been circulated, gives the ACT government the opportunity to work through all of those issues. That is the only practical way we can approach this. Whilst I appreciate that there is a lot of interest in relation to where this will go, we need the opportunity to be able to have those negotiations, and Ms Orr's amendment allows us to do so. I commend it to the Assembly.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (3.33), by leave: I move:

(1) Omit paragraph (3)(b), substitute:

- “(b) work proactively with the Commonwealth Government, the local disability sector, and people with disability in the ACT, to roll out Foundational Supports effectively and efficiently such that nobody falls through the cracks, positioning the ACT as a nation-leader in disability services and inclusion;
- (c) write to the Commonwealth Government explaining that the Legislative Assembly's view is that the ACT Government's negotiating position should be informed by the Commonwealth's provision of a detailed plan for the implementation of Foundational Supports, including “Thriving Kids”, requesting the plan to include:
 - (i) timeframes for consideration and decision making;
 - (ii) the process for consultation with people with disability, disability service providers, carers and family members;
 - (iii) projected costings and impacts on current and forward budgets;
- (iv) planning milestones, consultation commitments, and outcome targets;
 - (v) evidence of safeguards, such as research, quality assurance, and evaluation mechanisms;
 - (vi) any rule changes under the NDIS Act;

- (vii) details of reassessment and future assessment criteria; and
 - (viii) objectives, guiding principles, and constraints for the design and delivery of Foundational Supports, including “Thriving Kids” in the ACT;”.
- (2) After paragraph (3)(c)(vi), add:

“(vii) the proactive work undertaken by the ACT Government to ensure there is no gap in support for Canberrans with disability during and following the transition to Foundational Supports”.

I would like to start by sincerely thanking my colleagues and their officers for the collaborative spirit in which this motion was brought forward, discussed and carefully workshopped. I would particularly like to thank Ms Barry and her team for their obvious tireless commitment to Canberra’s disability community and for providing the first draft of this motion so early and in such good faith, ready to work on it together. I know that officers across the political spectrum have invested a lot of time and effort into collaborating on the various iterations of this motion. While it is also my preference for us to land a shared position, I still want to acknowledge the value of our respectful and healthy democratic system in action in developing positions on this motion.

We know this is not an easy time for people with disability, for their families or for their loved ones. The rollout of the NDIS was one of the most significant social policy reforms in Australia’s history. But today we find ourselves in a situation where failings at multiple levels of government over many years have left the system at breaking point. NDIS costs are escalating out of control.

The commonwealth is trying desperately to cap growth. We now see them attempting to bring the scheme back to its original design, a tiered model of support that was meant to appropriately accommodate all types of disability, but which was rush into operation, despite warnings from the Productivity Commission and sector experts that certain details of the scheme required more thought. The result is that, what was once a revolutionary scheme, one that transformed the lives of so many Australians with disability, is now unsustainable—and, instead of clarity, we have been left with confusion. Instead of a coordinated approach, we have a standoff with state and territory governments apparently being left in the lurch to clean up the commonwealth’s mess. To the shame of everyone involved, really, our disability community is left in the dark, waiting to learn their fate.

We know that national cabinet publicly agreed to significant structural NDIS reforms in December 2023. At the time, the commonwealth indicated that the first trench of reforms would be delivered within six months—yet here we are, nearly two years later, with no clear plan, no certainly for participants and no confidence that governments are actually working together to get this right. Then, just last month, we saw the sudden announcement of the Thriving Kids program, with no prior consultation with state or territory governments and certainly no engagement with the disability community. This has caused real fear among parents of, particularly neurodivergent children, who worry that their kids may lose the supports they depend on to thrive.

It is undeniable that the commonwealth’s approach to these reforms has shown disregard for the wellbeing of people with disability and the sustainability for organisations that support them. It has also shown disregard for states and territories,

who, without appropriate levels of information and negotiating power, are unable to begin the task of establishing the systems that will need to step up when the commonwealth steps out.

That is why I am not only speaking in support of Labor's amendments to the original motion but also bringing forward my own amendments. My amendments are designed to reinforce the spirit and intent of Ms Barry's motion, which rightly calls for clarity, transparency and strong advocacy from the ACT government. I also appreciate that the government's amendment appropriately recognises that these reforms are being led by the commonwealth government. This is fundamentally a commonwealth reform that will be delivered by the states and territories.

Ultimately, my motivation on this particular matter is to achieve the best possible outcomes for people with disability in the ACT. I know we all share that motivation. But, for me, unfortunately, while I absolutely agree with the intent of Ms Barry's motion, I am struggling to reconcile its specific calls for the outcomes, I think, we are actually all hoping to see emerge from this motion.

I am worried that we are allowing our frustrations with the negotiations between governments to seek instead demands that do not produce the outcomes that we want. I think our energy would be more appropriately directed to seeking consensus on the Assembly's expectations for the ACT government's negotiating position and to clearly communicate to the commonwealth that its approach to disability reform has been unacceptable and must change—but without letting the ACT government off the hook, so to speak, for ensuring the success of these reforms here in the territory.

My proposed amendments have been drafted with these aims in mind, seeking a greater level of commitment from the ACT government to work proactively to ensure that Canberrans continue to receive the supports that they need and do not fall through the cracks during the transition to the new foundational support system. My amendments also clarify that it is this Assembly's expectation that the ACT government must be clear to the commonwealth. Our negotiating position for these reforms must be informed by a detailed public plan with timeframes, consultation processes, costings and safeguards, so that both this Assembly and our community are provided with clarity around the future of disability supports and confidence that we are heading towards a stronger, fairer and more sustainable system.

We cannot underestimate what is at stake here. The NDIS remains one of the most significant social compacts this country has ever made with its citizens. It must not allow confusion, delay and piecemeal reform to undermine it. I commend the Assembly's multipartisan commitment to advocating for Canberrans with disability and hope this motion represents the start of more fruitful and proactive discussions about how we can do more in this place to support this community.

Again, I thank Ms Barry and her office, Ms Orr and her office and also my office for their work. There has been a lot of time and effort that has gone into negotiating an outcome on this motion. I hope that the commonwealth heeds our calls for a transparency engagement and good faith negotiations and rightly centres the reforms around co-design with the disability community. I also want to take this opportunity to call on the ACT government to show leadership throughout these reforms, positioning

itself proactively as a nation leader in disability services and inclusion.

I again thank Ms Barry for offering us this opportunity to affirm this Assembly's commitment to standing with people with disability to ensure that the reforms ahead strengthen, rather than diminishing, the life-changing promise of the NDIS.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (3.39): I understand that Labor will be supporting Mr Emerson's amendment to Ms Orr's amendment. I rise to speak in support of Ms Orr's amendment. I have to say, not having been involved in the detailed negotiations on this matter, that Ms Orr has been keeping the Labor caucus up to date. But I was quite confused by listening to both Ms Barry and Miss Nuttall. Ms Barry said that her motion was about transparency and reporting, but Ms Orr's amendment maintains the call for transparency and recognises, appropriately, the ACT government's responsibilities in the development and design of foundational supports and the information that we need from the commonwealth, for the reasons that Ms Orr and the Chief Minister have outlined, to be able to participate and advocate on behalf of the ACT community.

Listening to Ms Barry and Miss Nuttall, it was almost as though they had not actually read Ms Orr's amendment. One of them said that it completely removed the calls-on. I think it was Miss Nuttall. In fact, when you read the calls-on, most of the things that are called on in Ms Barry's motion are not only included in Ms Orr's amendment but also expanded on. Ms Orr's amendment would require additional reporting and additional work. Ms Orr's amendment also explicitly calls on the ACT government to advocate for a foundational support system that meets the needs of the ACT community. Of course, we have been doing that. We have been doing that since the release of the NDIS review and we will continue to do that, as the Chief Minister said. First ministers, treasurers, health ministers and education ministers have been involved in this conversation as well, and of course disability ministers have had many, many conversations about this.

Ms Orr's amendment calls on the ACT government to ensure we have better information from the commonwealth so that we can, in fact, collaborate constructively in designing a joint foundational supports program. Mr Emerson's amendment adjusts some of those calls in the same vein. Miss Nuttall said in her contribution—and this is not an exact quote but words to the effect: "There are so many unanswered questions to the commonwealth." Well, yes; there are so many unanswered questions to the commonwealth, which is why Ms Orr's amendment explicitly calls on the ACT government to seek that information from the commonwealth, which we have been doing and will continue to do.

Finally, Ms Orr's amendment calls on the ACT government to keep the Assembly up to date, with the same level of frequency as Ms Barry is calling on, on the work the ACT government is doing and the ACT government's contribution, including consultation with people with disability and the sector—on policy and program planning, on safeguarding and quality assurance and on the information that is received from the commonwealth, to the extent that this will not compromise negotiations. I cannot believe that anyone in this place would want us to make comment here that would compromise our negotiations with the commonwealth.

Many of the points that Ms Barry, Miss Nuttall, Mr Emerson and, indeed, Ms Orr have made about foundational supports and Thriving Kids are perfectly legitimate. When I listen to everybody, I feel that we are on the same page. The only reason that the Canberra Liberals and the ACT Greens are not accepting Ms Orr's amendment is that they are too stubborn. I was genuinely confused, because everything that they said indicates that they would actually agree with everything that is in Ms Orr's amendment. I have not been part of the detailed negotiations and I do not know how we got to this point, but I think that, by and large, we are on the same page about what we want for the people of the ACT, particularly children with developmental delay and their families.

For those who were not around at the time, the ACT government in fact commenced consultation on foundational supports for children under nine last year. The Disability Reference Group hosted a roundtable and has continued to provide advice and feedback on what foundational supports should look like—all three elements of foundational supports. That roundtable was specifically focused on children under nine, and that has informed the ACT government's position to date. We are absolutely committed to ongoing consultation and engagement with the community, but, without the additional information from the commonwealth, there is little point having the same conversation with the community over and over again. We hear about consultation fatigue regularly. We respect the time of our disability advocates and stakeholders and want to go to them with enough information so that they can provide substantial and relevant feedback.

We did the work last year, because it had already been identified that children under nine with developmental delay would be the first area of focus for the development of foundational supports. The commonwealth's announcement on Thriving Kids has, in fact, largely reiterated this existing position. But we fully understand—and Ms Orr has been pretty frank about this, as I have also been in my advocacy at the Health Ministers Meeting and directly with Minister Butler—that the way this announcement was made has actually led to more confusion all round. Again, that is why getting the additional detail Ms Orr has articulated is so important. As Ms Orr noted, in line with bringing together the National Health Reform Agreement and foundational supports into a combined negotiation, work is occurring across a range of ministerial councils and negotiations. We are basing our advocacy on what we have heard from our community and on the nature of our own ecosystem.

Whatever is delivered must work for the ACT. What we are trying to address is the findings of the NDIS review—that part of the ecosystem is missing—and the outcomes of the Australian Early Development Census for the ACT, which I know Mr Emerson has talked about before and has been a focus of mine for some time. The situation we are now in is highlighted in the description of an upcoming event co-hosted by the Health Care Consumers' Association and Northside Community Service. They are hosting an event in October. The event description says:

Parents, carers, teachers and health services often tell us that it can be hard to know what to do, and where to go when a child is showing social, behavioural, communication, emotional or other developmental differences.

If you've been confused by this, come along to hear from speakers from across the public, private and community sector about the pathways they offer for child

development challenges.

You will hear from:

- Canberra Health Services—Community Paediatric and Child Health Service
- ACT Health and Community Services—Child Development Services
- EACH—Early Childhood NDIS Partner
- Spark for Life Psychology
- Little Hands Occupational Therapy
- A Village for Every Child—Collective Action Group for Child Development for 0-5yo—

which is in Belconnen—

- ACT Playgroups
- Capital Region Community Services

We are not starting from scratch. What we are starting from is a fragmented system in which the NDIS early intervention pathway has not done what we expected it to do when we entered into the NDIS 10 years ago. That is why we invested and have continued to grow our investment in the Child Development Service.

Foundational supports for children under nine are so important. Thriving Kids, if it actually meets the objectives that Minister Butler has outlined, will help us to build an ecosystem that supports the children with developmental delay and provide an opportunity for us to rethink how we design and deliver supports for children and their families. It will enable us to draw on best practice and evidence, which tells us that children are best supported in the context of their families and communities, in settings where they also learn, play and socialise—not necessarily through, as Ms Orr has said, individualised therapy sessions, but with access to those if they need them.

I was recently talking to the parent of a child who had the supports they needed and is now thriving, and that is what I want for every child in this community. It is frustrating to me in the extreme that we are having a pedantic conversation about who is responsible for what, when it is absolutely clear who is responsible for the announcement of Thriving Kids and who needs to provide the information so that the ACT government can get on with advocating to build a stronger system of supports for children and their families in the ACT.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (3.49): I will be brief. I want to clarify, based on some of the minister's comments, where we stand on these amendments. During negotiations, the Greens were clear that we would have been fine if the amendments suggested by the minister were additive rather than replacing a number of calls on the ACT government to do core work.

What I fear that we would get from these amendments, should they pass, would be a letter to the commonwealth. Indeed, if the commonwealth were stalling on Thriving Kids and on Foundational Supports, the ACT government could report that the commonwealth was stalling, but there would probably be no further action and, at the end of the day, people with a disability would be left in the lurch.

I am just not convinced that these amendments would provide the driving force for the ACT government to come back and represent the interests of people with a disability in the ACT. That is our reason for not supporting these amendments. If they had been offered as an additional call to write to the commonwealth—indeed, you would probably need to write to the commonwealth in order to get the information you need to provide an ACT-specific response—we would have been supportive of that. The fact is that they are seeking to take away parts of Ms Barry’s motion that put the onus back on the ACT government to have their own implementation plan for the people of Canberra, which is why we are not supporting these amendments 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) (3.51): Going briefly to Mr Emerson’s amendments, as Minister Stephen-Smith said, ACT Labor, the government, will be supporting Mr Emerson’s amendments. I would like to thank him for his considered and genuine interest in working through the issues and building a consensus. We are very happy to support what he has moved, as it definitely goes to the intent that we have been putting into our work today, and I am happy to provide clarity on the record, if that is what people would like.

With respect to Miss Nuttall’s comments around the amendments and the watering down, I think people are now starting perhaps to see where we came a bit unstuck in the ongoing negotiations. I still struggle to understand how we could better describe that the ACT government cannot speak for the commonwealth government. It is not our jurisdictional responsibility. It is not something that we can do.

With respect to where negotiations are up to, as I said in my speech, it is about the parameters, to get on with the design and implementation of the Foundational Supports program. Picking up on what Minister Stephen-Smith said, it has to be something that works for the ACT. I do not think we should be racing forward to sign up to anything. We need to see the detail. We need to make sure that it does work, having regard to what our community needs. Those are the parameters that we are still working out—the detailed planning, the nuance, how it would apply, and exactly where it would go. Those all come after you have the broad parameters. Those are the negotiations that are currently being considered.

The ACT government is very happy to provide—we will be, and have been, providing—information on what we will be inputting, once we know the parameters that we can work around. That is reflected in my amendment.

With respect to what Miss Nuttall was talking about—I am paraphrasing, so please bear with me if I do not get it entirely correct; I hope I do not misrepresent Miss Nuttall in what I am about to say—the commonwealth, if we write a letter to them, might come back with some information. It might not, and we will not be any the wiser. If the commonwealth will not respond to a question with an answer, we are simply not going to have the information. You cannot place the onus on the ACT government to answer for the commonwealth. The commonwealth has to answer for the commonwealth.

Again, the ACT government is more than happy and very open to continuing to provide information. We will continue to advocate to the commonwealth government for our

community, with the feedback we have received so far, as to what would work for the ecosystem in our area.

We do not want to create more confusion and uncertainty around attributing responsibilities in what is a very complex and extensive negotiation, with a lot of different components. We are one of many jurisdictions that have a say in this, as the Chief Minister was talking about. We need to be able to work through the negotiations in such a way that they are not prejudiced, that we are not jumping to particular conclusions, and that we are not giving away negotiating advantages over other components because we have to put information on the record or because we have been told to take a particular position.

At the end of the day, we want a good outcome for Canberrans, for people with disabilities, their families, their carers and their loved ones. I think that view is shared by everyone. The only bit where we are perhaps a little different is that maybe we have different negotiating styles when it comes to how we get there. I will continue to support a position that allows the government to go forward, to negotiate with the commonwealth and to get the parameters that will set us up to have a really good foundational supports system.

I will wrap up my comments. I thank Mr Emerson and his office for the way they have approached these negotiations and the way they have interacted with the substance and the detail of this. I appreciate the thoughtfulness that he has taken in bringing forward his amendments. As I said, we will be supporting those.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (3.58): I rise to speak on the need for the ACT government to take a proactive and strategic role in shaping disability reform, particularly as it relates to foundational supports. While the commonwealth holds responsibility for the overarching policy, the ACT must understand its own sector, its gaps and its foundational support requirements, so that the ACT can be at the negotiating table advocating for the best interests of Canberrans.

The government should have a clear project plan, a plan that identifies the gaps in ACT services, a negotiation strategy to ensure all necessary services are included in foundational supports, the implications of both general and targeted supports for our community, and the impact that these reforms will have on our budget.

This cannot be left to chance. The ACT must have a plan and be proactive in contributing to the development of both the policy and its implementation. We must ensure that the services our community needs are delivered. The implementation of this major reform must not result in people being excluded from the NDIS without having alternative supports in place. No-one should be left without adequate support. Foundational supports must extend beyond early childhood. Disability reform must be inclusive, comprehensive and protect those who rely on it.

The ACT and the federal government must work collaboratively to strengthen the NDIS system and the foundational supports, and the ACT must have a plan to participate. Our community deserves transparency, certainty and action.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (3.59): What an astounding process this has been, and

what astounding claims have been made as we have proceeded through this debate. We have heard from a minister, who seems to have forgotten what term of government we are in, delivering just another arrogant rewrite. And it is an arrogant rewrite, Mr Deputy Speaker. Ms Barry has gone to the effort of delivering a motion that could be considered and debated amongst colleagues for well over a week. She has provided all possible opportunities to land a consensus position. It is important to understand that the minister has decided, in her amendment, rather than negotiating around parts of it, to omit all text after “(1) notes that”.

That is it. After “notes that”, the minister thought that the minister’s perspective, the minister’s way of writing things, was better, irrespective of whether there is crossover of interests and intent. The minister had the arrogance to deliver a complete rewrite, while negotiations were going on in good faith across this chamber.

I have to commend Ms Barry, because Ms Barry did not have to provide any extra notice to the minister or the crossbench. But this was such an important matter to Ms Barry, and to many people across our community, that she thought it deserved to be put in front of everyone as early as possible, so that we could have a constructive discussion.

There was no reason for us to get to this place today. I am sure it would have been in the government’s interest to have progressed this swiftly, to move on to other things that they may wish to discuss. I do not think it takes much time to read anyone’s mind on this matter, because instead we have just taken up a significant portion of the day by having two ministers deciding to say that a complete rewrite is not that significant.

I absolutely disagree, especially with Minister Stephen-Smith’s characterisation. It is a little bit off. The minister seems to think that everything possible in Ms Barry’s motion was covered in Ms Orr’s rewrite. That is not the case. In rewriting it, this arrogant approach from an out-of-touch minister drops off a bunch of key things. The minister seems to not want to acknowledge the uncertainty of costs to the ACT, not acknowledge fifty-fifty funding splits, and not acknowledge the lack of detail from federal Labor.

She may have addressed federal Labor’s terrible handling of this matter in her speech, but for some reason she thought it was appropriate to take it out of the motion. To me, what is extraordinary is the amount of effort that this minister has put into what seems to be absolutely incompetent handling of a matter that did not need to turn out this way.

It is astounding to me that the minister is trying, it seems to me, to hand all the blame to the federal government. The minister seems proud that, as a minister, she is no better informed than anyone else. That is what she said in her speech—that she is no better informed than anyone else in this place. I think Canberrans have a right to expect that a minister in the ACT, when it comes to policies impacting their portfolio, programs from the federal government impacting their portfolio, will be the best-informed person in the room, and not just say, “I know nothing more than anyone else.”

This has not been a new issue that has dropped today. Very clearly, there have been opportunities for the minister to engage with her federal counterparts. The minister could have got on the phone. The minister had a week’s warning before this landed. If she wished to, she could have been on the phone, finding out all the detail that was

being sought in this motion.

It is extremely important to understand that the heart of this motion—not just the technical aspects that the minister seems so caught up with—goes to calling on the ACT government to take action, and not just leave everything up to the federal government. Clearly, the minister thinks there was terrible handling of the announcement. The minister needs to be on the front foot when it comes to incredibly important supports that ACT families should be able to expect the minister to be across.

This government was absolutely adamant that having a federal Labor government would make everything better, yet we are now in a place where we are seeing unilateral action, in the absence of strong consultation, apparently, with the ACT government. It is not acceptable to be in this position, and I am absolutely dismayed with the way the debate has proceeded.

Just briefly, I will touch on Mr Emerson's amendments, which he has chosen to bring forward, even though he knew that the amendment that he is seeking to amend was going down. Once again it looks like Mr Emerson is largely falling in line with Labor. He is very happy to fall in line with the government so that he can grandstand a little bit more, and make sure that he gets his time in the sun. It is not a helpful contribution to the debate.

It did not move things on. It did not move us closer to a consensus position. All it did was exacerbate and extend the amount of time that we have spent talking about what should have been, if all was going well, if all was functional within the government, a straightforward discussion, a straightforward motion, and everyone in this place should have been able to support it.

If the minister's arrogant amendment is so close to what Ms Barry put in front of the minister over a week ago, why couldn't they just support it in the first place?

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (4.07): I just wanted to again say how appreciative I am of everyone who has spoken to this motion. I again want to thank the spokesperson for the Greens, Miss Nuttall, and her office. I want to thank the minister. This has been a very complex negotiation. I also want to acknowledge that negotiations around this program is complex. I do not take for granted the level of work that needs to go into negotiations. It is a wicked problem—one that has not been caused by the ACT government; however, they have a role to play in the implementation of foundational supports.

When I wrote down this motion, it was really vanilla. I said, "There is nothing controversial in this motion, and I am sure we will get consensus across the board." When I received the amendments from the minister's office, I was quite shocked that the core of the motion, which is my (3)(a) "that the ACT government sets out its plan"—its own plan—"for the implementation of foundational supports" was rewritten to say that they write to the commonwealth. That is not what we accept.

I want to speak briefly to some of the comments that have been made here about this motion. I thank the minister for her comments. I particularly want to speak to her comments around requiring the government to announce decisions before they are made. I do not think that is what my motion is calling for. My motion is simply calling

for an update to the Assembly on progress as it occurs—What do you know? Tell us what you know. If you do not know anything, tell us that. My motion simply makes sure that, at all times, someone has their eye on this very complex issue that would affect lives.

I want to thank the Chief Minister for his update on progress and changes in national cabinet. I accept that the deck chairs are moving on these policy settings. But this is exactly why we need the accountability as outlined in this motion. It is exactly why we need to make sure our eyes are on the ball. I disagree with the Chief Minister about how we have put the cart before the horse. I firmly believe that accountability should always be led by the horse in any circumstances. Accountability should lead the horse.

On Mr Emerson's amendments, I struggle to see the difference between Mr Emerson's amendments and the government amendment. Yes, there are a few changes but, fundamentally, they are the same—it is still writes of the commonwealth. His amendments take away the responsibility of the ACT government, their role, in delivering foundational supports. I honestly do not see how that fundamentally makes any difference. I thank him for his engagement. I thank him for speaking to me about the motion. We do not have to agree all the time—and this is one of the times when we will not.

I thank Ms Stephen-Smith for her contribution. I note her comments around not reading the motion. I think it is clearly stated that, when you read 3(a) of my motion and you read the government's amendment, fundamentally, the difference is that the government's amendment strips out any role for the ACT government.

We are going to be voting on these amendments. In closing, I just wanted to again say thank you to everyone who has contributed to this conversation. It obviously shows that this is a really important issue. It is a wicked issue if you have the Chief Minister coming and speaking to it, and it is an issue that cuts across various portfolios. I again want to stress that, having been engaged in discussions and conversations, bilateral state conversations on important issues across the commonwealth, I understand the complexity; however, I still think, and I believe, that this is more reason why we need to make sure that this Assembly is updated every six months about the progress. It could be that, in six months, as I have indicated to the minister, she has no dates—and that is fine. The planned implementation is 12 months. If, in six months, negotiations have protracted beyond that timeline, we would need to know what the plan is: What sector mapping has been done to identify gaps? What are the future projections? What have we done to ensure that once foundational support takes effect, we are ready. What have we done?

Once again, I thank everyone who has been involved in this conversation, and I thank everybody for their contribution. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Emerson's amendment to **Ms Orr's** proposed amendment negatived.

Question put:

That **Ms Orr's** amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 9

Noes 12

Yvette Berry	Rachel Stephen-Smith	Chiaka Barry	Jeremy Hanson
Tara Cheyne	Caitlin Tough	Andrew Braddock	James Milligan
Thomas Emerson		Peter Cain	Laura Nuttall
Suzanne Orr		Fiona Carrick	Mark Parton
Marisa Paterson		Leanne Castley	Shane Rattenbury
Michael Pettersson		Jo Clay	Jeremy Hanson
Chris Steel		Ed Cocks	James Milligan
		Chiaka Barry	Laura Nuttall

Question resolved in the negative.

Ms Orr's amendment negatived.

Original question resolved in the affirmative.

SDN Bluebell childcare centre

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (4.18): Together with Ms Clay, I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes:

- (a) that SDN Bluebell has provided exceptionally high-quality education and care to young Canberrans since 1996, and has developed a tight-knit and highly engaged community of educators and families, many of whom will be greatly impacted by its impending closure;
- (b) the Mitchell Institute's 2024 "Mapping the childcare deserts" report notes that the Belconnen region has some of the highest unmet demand for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Canberra, with some areas having available space for just over a quarter of the children living in the area;
- (c) the recent cross-party Children First Alliance Roundtable has highlighted the pressures currently experienced by not-for-profit ECEC centres, and has called for increased partnership between the sector and government;
- (d) the planned closure of SDN Bluebell reflects ongoing struggles faced by not-for-profit ECEC providers throughout Canberra who are struggling to compete with for-profit providers for facilities; and
- (e) not-for-profit ECEC provides high-quality, affordable education for families and supportive workplaces for early childhood educators, focused on the best education for children in their care rather than turning a profit;

(2) further notes that:

- (a) a development application for 44 College Street (Section 45 Block 16 Belconnen) was lodged on 25 March 2025, proposing the demolition of the existing childcare centre on the site to make way for a multi-unit development;

- (b) SDN Bluebell announced its intended end-of-year closure in mid-August this year, due to the lease ending and the crown lease holder proceeding to develop residential dwellings on the site. The SDN Bluebell community has responded quickly and clearly about how disappointed they are in the loss of this vital institution;
 - (c) on 18 September, SDN Bluebell announced that their lease had been extended until December 2026 or until a new facility was found;
 - (d) the site's crown lease provides that:
 - (i) the purpose of the lease is for a childcare centre, and any other use of the premise is in addition to that; and
 - (ii) the lease may be terminated if a year passes without the land being used for this purpose; and
 - (e) the current development application does not seek to vary the crown lease; and
- (3) calls on the ACT Government to:
- (a) request advice from the Territory Planning Authority on whether the proposed development of Block 16 Section 45 Belconnen would be compliant with conditions of the current crown lease and table this by 21 October 2025;
 - (b) undertake a demand and supply analysis for ECEC centres in the ACT, including the Belconnen area, to better understand the impact of SDN Bluebell's potential closure and table this by March 2026;
 - (c) provide SDN Bluebell with any support required in finding an alternate location and undertaking appropriate modifications to make sure it complies with relevant building standards and the National Quality Framework; and
 - (d) commit to providing targeted assistance for not-for-profit ECEC centres at risk of closing, such as assisting them in finding alternate sites.

We need to do more for the early childhood education and care sector. This should be a statement that everyone here can agree with. In particular, we need to provide more support to the not-for-profit sector. This is a collection of centres that provide high-quality education and care and often explore innovative, pedagogical practice.

Not-for-profit centres are often highly engaged with both their local community and the community formed from the families that send their children there. I am hearing constant stories of centres being forced to close because of the intense competition in this city for land. Every not-for-profit centre forced to close is a personal and painful tragedy for all of the families that rely on them. An early childhood education and care centre is more than a place that children are sent; it is almost part of the family—and right now it is just about mobile. I can hear some of the kiddos outside; it is adorable.

When we talk about the pressures facing these centres, I get it. There are a lot of incredibly important uses for land in Canberra and, more and more so, housing is high on that list. But providing support for the youngest and most vulnerable people among us is also essential. There are very few things that should take precedence over that.

Our motion today will not fix every single challenge facing early childhood education

and care providers in the ACT. It would be cool if it did. All I want to do today is make a push to save one particular centre that has been clearly doing exceptional work, which is SDN Bluebell. When SDN Bluebell announced last month it would be closing in December because its lease was not going to be renewed, pending a development application of the site, Bluebell families immediately rallied around the centre and its staff. Their sentiment was clear: we cannot lose quality centres like Bluebell and something has to be done.

Ms Clay and I wrote letters and Mr Cain sponsored a petition. He and Ms Barry spoke in the chamber against the proposed closure in the chamber. And now Ms Clay and I are moving a motion together to get the government to help SDN Bluebell and high-quality centres like it to find space to continue to deliver excellent, high-quality early childhood education and care to their community.

I want to start with an important note for this motion. We are not moving this motion because the government have done something wrong. Could they do more for the sector? Sure, always; but today is not about that. All we are asking here is for the government to make sure everyone involved in the potential closure of SDN Bluebell is aware of the requirements of the Crown lease. I want to make sure that we avoid the potential closure of an incredibly important centre just because of a misunderstanding. And if the development does go ahead, we are asking the government to do everything in its power to ensure SDN Bluebell continues to operate somewhere in Belconnen for the good of the community.

I want to speak a bit to the stories I have heard about SDN Bluebell, and I want to acknowledge some of the SDN Bluebell families joining us today. Thank you; you snuck in as quiet as mice and I really appreciate it—through you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to give a huge shout-out to how amazing the SDN Bluebell families have been. They have been an incredibly good, well-organised lobbying group, making it clear to all involved parties how essential this centre is to them. If this motion succeeds in its ultimate goal, if we save SDN Bluebell, that credit should overwhelmingly go to those families before it goes to any of us MLAs. When Bluebell is safe, I sincerely hope they find another cause to lobby for, because these guys are unstoppable.

I have heard a few stories from parents that I would like to get on the record here in *Hansard*, because I think that real human story is something we should never lose sight of in this place. One mum spoke to her son's absolute love for the centre. She said, "Every day has been filled with joy, learning and laughter alongside his friends, the caring educators, and the wonderful interns from UC and CIT." For the educators, she said that "their warmth and professionalism has given my husband and me peace of mind while we work fulltime".

As first-generation immigrants, Bluebell has given them a level of support they would not otherwise have, with no family in the area. The closure of SDN Bluebell would mean the disruption of their work schedules, and they are concerned it would disrupt their son's development, tearing him away from his friends and the educators he loves. They described Bluebell as a "safe haven, a community and a second home for our child".

Another parent reached out with questions potential closure of SDN Bluebell has forced

her to ask. I quote:

Will we be able to get care for when we need it? Will we be able to balance our need for child care with choosing care that best fits with the needs of our family? What happens if we don't get a place? How many days can I afford to go part-time before it impacts our finances too much? Right now I am on track for a promotion. If I go even more part-time how will this impact my career in the long term?

As for her son, she says that he:

... adores his carers and comes back from childcare so excited and intellectually stimulated. He is an only child and likely to remain one. This is his main chance to meet and form bonds with peers and learn important social skills. What happens when these bonds and attachments are broken so suddenly?

These parents have no plan B if SDN Bluebell closes. The closure of the centre could be a disaster that would genuinely alter the future of entire families.

Another parent has said:

We are sad for our daughter to lose her precious friends—although we know she would make new ones, she is filled with joy at her little pals every day, and we as her parents are filled with joy to see her happy. We are concerned about juggling new days, possibly having to reduce our working hours to care for her, as we will not put her in a centre if we don't completely trust it. This will impact our financial stability currently as we are paying off a mortgage and dealing with high cost of living.

She also went on to speak very highly about how well SDN Bluebell has interacted with a child with ADHD—which is awesome—making her feel welcomed and loved. As an ADHD myself, this fills me with joy. The staff went above and beyond to make her feel like her different way of seeing the world was not something to be hidden. She was celebrated and she always felt welcome.

The last parent I will quote has genuinely considering moving back to Sydney for more early childhood education and care options. She has absolutely loved SDN Bluebell. With aging parents who do not speak English to care for, an early childhood education and care centre she can trust absolutely is essential. She says this whole episode, has “made me doubt how much the ACT government values education”.

I will acknowledge that all of these messages came well before the additional year was provided to SDN Bluebell. But I think the majority of these concerns remain. Except for parents who have children finishing at the centre next year, these issues are not really going to go away for them. Concerns about waiting lists of other centres, loss of community, the weight of other family commitments and a loss of trust in educational institutions in Canberra are still issues. For women, in particular, early childhood education and care is essential in allowing them to hold down ongoing employment where they are presumed to be the primary caregiver and to be able to build a career without being forced to forego motherhood.

The families at SDN Bluebell are amazingly well organised and, considering the

specific wording in the Crown lease, I believe there certainly is a pathway by which SDN Bluebell can be saved. However, there are so many centres which do not have those two aspects in their favour, and I cannot help but wondering how many centres across Canberra have closed quietly simply because there was no remaining lifeline to stay open.

We need to rethink how we handle early childhood education and care in this city. Experts in the field say that we are experiencing an issue they describe as “oversupply-undersupply”—there are too many centres, especially for-profit, and a shortage of staff. Both these factors are doing some pretty serious damage to not-for-profit centres and make it nearly impossible for new not-for-profit providers to set up in this city. As SDN Bluebell has shown us, even well-established centres with exceptional records and reputations cannot consider themselves safe. So we need to do more.

It is my sincere hope that the calls in this motion succeed in saving SDN Bluebell and that they also prompt measures to save not-for-profit early childhood education and care centres across Canberra. A supply and demand analysis will hopefully give us a clear picture of where support is needed and where families are struggling the most, where we can make the most difference. I really welcome amendments from the government, which go more to the specificity of the kind of work we can do to support not-for-profit early childhood education and care providers here in the ACT. We really appreciate their time and work on this, and I think we are united on a common goal on this one.

I sincerely thank everyone here for negotiating in good faith and with a goal to produce the most beneficial outcome. I truly believe everyone in this Assembly, and indeed the gallery, wants to ensure that SDN Bluebell has a future. I hope the same passion and positive engagement will continue as we explore more wide-reaching support for the early childhood education and care sector in the future.

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER: Before I go to you, Ms Clay, I would just like to say to our visitors in the gallery that you are very welcome. Please do not stress about any the noise of the children. They are extremely well behaved, and far better than might have been seen in members here.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (4.28): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and we will all model good behaviour, I think, at the moment. I am really happy to speak about the motion, circulated by my colleague Miss Nuttall and I, on SDN Bluebell and the early childhood sector in Belconnen. I would like to thank Minister Berry for her positive engagement and for the amendments that she has circulated that improve this.

It has been an extra-hard year for families in Belconnen, following the closure of the not-for-profit Bruce Early Learning Centre and the uncertainty of SDN Bluebell’s long-term future. Nationally, there has been some really hard-to-read news in the childcare sector and it has been distressing for families and staff. It is important that the government steps up to ensure that trusted centres like Bluebell are supported.

As a mum, I know how hard and anxious it is getting into child care, let alone an early learning centre that supports your family’s needs. So I really feel for the families in Belconnen who have been dealing with the stress around this uncertainty. The best

outcome would be for Bluebell to remain open and for us to support all of the many families that they are caring for.

Families deserve to have services they can trust and kids deserve to have environments where they can thrive as they grow. It is as simple as that. As my colleague Laura Nuttall noted, the Greens have heard first hand from families about how instrumental Bluebell has been for the development of their children and the support that they have provided over many years. We have heard the highest praise for this centre—its professionalism, its compassion, its enthusiasm and its genuine care for children and staff.

It is a great result that SDN Bluebell recently announced their lease has been extended until December 2026 or until a new facility has been found. Before that, SDN Bluebell were due to close at the end of the year. So well done to the parents and children at Bluebell for that excellent result so far. It is a testament to really good advocacy and to bringing forward an issue on which it is so clear what the outcome should be.

SDN Bluebell have been operating from the site since 1996, almost 30 years, providing trusted services to families across Belconnen, including from buildings nearby like the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The land where they are located is part of a larger area designated as national land. That larger area was sold, the declaration of land was revoked and the larger block was split into three blocks. Separate Crown leases were issued over each block, including the block on which SDN Bluebell were located and a sublease with a provider which allowed SDN Bluebell to continue operating from their site.

The purpose clause for the Crown lease was written in such a way that it seems the primary use for the site was a childcare centre with some additional uses allowed. A further clause in the Crown lease makes it clear that, if the property was not used one year for a purpose permitted in the Crown lease, the territory could terminate that lease. The development application before the Territory Planning Authority proposed demolition of the childcare site and the development of residential dwellings across the entire site. I have received copies of correspondence to the Minister for Planning from SDN Bluebell parents who were concerned that, if the childcare centre was demolished, the owner might be in breach of that Crown lease. So we asked the minister about this.

Miss Nuttall and I wrote to Minister Berry and Minister Steel on 10 of September asking for advice about the provisions in the Crown lease, and asked a further question of the Minister for Planning in the Assembly on 16 September and was advised that Access Canberra had not yet engaged with the owners of SDN Bluebell in relation to their obligations under the lease; nor has Access Canberra provided advice to SDN Bluebell in relation to the provisions under the Planning Act 2023. While the lease for SDN Bluebell has been extended to at least December 2026, the issue with the Crown lease is still relevant. That is why advice from the Territory Planning Authority about whether the proposed development is compliant with the Crown lease will provide some really needed clarity.

High-quality accessible child care helps young children thrive and provides job opportunities, with governments all over Australia committing billions of dollars to increase the supply of early learning centres. But we need to provide the best system we can. Work done by the Mitchell Institute in 2022 and 2024 across Australia has

shown that accessibility has improved a little, with the ACT only having 14 per cent of our area as an early learning centre desert and the number of places per child increasing from 0.584 in 2022 to 0.636 in 2024. But we are worried about what is happening in the sector at the moment, and we still have improvement that we need to make. That is why it is really good to see that we will be getting a demand and supply analysis for early childhood education centres. That will help Canberra work out what we need.

We need excellent education to support our children to grow up happy and healthy, and that, of course, does not stop with early learning centres. In Belconnen, we have a growing population. We are really pleased to see that we have commitment for a primary school there. We think we also probably need a high school there, and we certainly need enough early learning centres. We have over 2,000 people there already and we are rapidly growing. So it is important that we plan ahead and make sure that we cover off on all of the needs of the families already there and the families moving in. The ACT government can also consider whether early learning centres can be co-located under this work. That is another way to ensure that families in our region have access to the care that they need. High-quality early childhood learning and education centres like SDN Bluebell really set children and families on a really good course for the future.

I want to share a few personal reflections. I had my child in 2014. We went on the waitlist, including for SDN Bluebell, when I was pregnant. We did not actually get a place until my child was one-and-a-half years old. We did not get into SDN Bluebell at all—I think it was too popular—but we did manage to find a really great centre, Macquarie Milestones. I remember it was a difficult time. I was immensely privileged to be in a position where we could pay our bills with my partner's salary. So we were not in immediate financial distress. There was the process of calling every week to see if our place had freed up and checking that we were still on that waitlist. I know for a lot of people that is even more stressful—having check to check and wondering how you can plan.

I was looking after my child and running my business from home. I did not earn a lot and I did not get a lot of work done. It is quite hard. I think there are high expectations on parents to simply absorb all the jobs—the caring jobs and the professional jobs—and it does not really work out that way. In distress, I asked my friends: just ask my friends, “How did you get in?” They said, “Waitlists do not really work; you just have to show up and cry.” We picked my partner to be the one to show up and cry. I am not sure exactly what he said, but we sent him down. Having been calling for a year and a half, he showed up and we had a place next week—so he got the job done. Well done for that.

It was an immensely valuable experience for my child to be in that centre. We had a really positive experience. She made her first friends there. As the only child of two adoring parents, she had the children and my friends who she hung out with, but, for her to find her first two friends of her own is something that she is so proud of. She is 11 years old and she still talks about this. They told her about *My Little Pony* and she came home, and she was like, “There is *My Little Pony*,” and I was like, “That is a terrible show. We had that when I was a kid. Do not watch that.” She said, “No, my friends told me about.” So we watched it. The modern *My Little Pony* was written by the people who made *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It is amazing. We have watched all six

seasons. It is fantastic.

Her friends that she made herself taught her how to swing herself on the swing. The only child of two adoring parents just does not have any reason to learn this skill unless somebody else teaches her. She is so proud. It was one of her first skills that she learnt from her friends.

I remember her graduation, and it was adorable. The centre went to a huge amount of effort. They had this song that they had taught all the kids. They got all the words wrong, but they practised really, really hard. They had a black cap and gown for every child to wear. So all of the four year olds showed up in their graduation outfits, except for my child, who decided that day she was a fairy and so she dressed as a fairy. When I arrived, the educators, who were so conscientious, were almost in tears because they could not persuade her to put on a cap and gown. I told them, “Don’t worry about it; she is a fairy. Fairies can graduate too. We love everybody. We will be all right.” So all of the kids in the black caps and gowns, and my fairy, lined up and they all graduated—and it was beautiful.

Afterwards, I asked my daughter why she did not want to wear the cap and gown, and she told me: “Don’t put on a hat; the kids who do never come back,” which suddenly took us to a very dark place and some conversations we probably should have had about transitions. It is quite interesting. There are these entire complex worlds going on in the heads and the lives of our children. To recognise the importance of having more people involved in that and really good high-quality supportive environments, we cannot underestimate it.

I think we have good results for SDN Bluebell here today—and I am so pleased. We will continue to work and get better results there. We have great results and really good will to help improve the early learning sector as well.

MS BERRY (Ginninderra—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Minister for Homes and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (4.38): First of all, I would like to thank Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay for bringing this motion to the Assembly today. I am always happy to talk about early childhood education and care in the ACT and what the ACT government can do to improve the quality of services for ACT families.

I too acknowledge the families here with us today and acknowledge the work they have done to support the continuation of SDN Bluebell, which is a most excellent service operating in the ACT. I had to remind myself that SDN has been supporting the learning and development of thousands of children in their first critical five years for decades. I think the service started here in the ACT in 1996. I can only imagine how pleased and relieved the entire SDN Bluebell community was on hearing the very good news that SDN Bluebell will continue to operate until December next year. I was very pleased to hear that information as well. This provides SDN Bluebell with some time to continue to look for a replacement site. That is good news for the SDN Bluebell community. The extension also provides important certainty for children, their families and educators.

The news about the closure of SDN Bluebell has been very difficult for children, their families and staff. I acknowledge that. I was contacted by many families at SDN

Bluebell who were concerned about the loss of this important service. It has been such a valued part of the Belconnen community for so many years. I take this opportunity to thank the families for writing to me and for their strong advocacy for their children and educators, as well as the broader SDN Bluebell community.

I would also like to thank Kay Turner, who is the CEO of SDN Children's Services, who has taken the time to speak with me and my office. Last week, I met with her to discuss the potential closure and the specific challenges that they were facing when considering purchasing or leasing land or property in the ACT to establish a new location for SDN Bluebell. SDN are watching today's speeches, so I hope that the level of support that they have from members in this place will provide them with some comfort. As members will know, I wrote to the developer of the site and asked about their plans to redevelop the SDN Bluebell site. Whilst it is not confirmed, I hope that my letter had some influence on the decision of the developer to extend the timeframe for Bluebell to continue to operate as a not-for-profit early childhood education and care service.

I have been lucky to visit this service over the last few decades—in fact, before my time in this place, when I was an early childhood education and care organiser with their union, working on campaigning for quality early childhood education and care services. Also, more recently, in 2023, I visited the service and was most excited to speak with the families and the young children, and particularly to meet their new chickens at the time. I do not know whether there are still chickens at the service, but at the time there were. They provided great comfort to the children and the staff at the service. I still have the poster that was gifted to me by the children at Bluebell. It hangs at the front door of my office. People pass and comment on it as they come into my office. I clearly understand the relationships and the importance of this service to the ACT community.

Not-for-profit providers like SDN are the preferred services in the ACT. They ensure that they put children before profit. Services like SDN invest in children and their workforce instead of shareholders, and this should be the priority for every early childhood education and care service. Around the country, rapid growth in the early learning sector is being driven by the property development market rather than real demand. This is a national issue that requires national reform.

At this point in the conversation I acknowledge all of the dedicated early childhood education and care educators—everybody in the early childhood sector, including parents like me and perhaps Jo, and their union, which has been advocating for change in this sector for decades. I am so happy to see parents joining this campaign. It has been a long campaign, supported by excellent services like SDN in the past and now. That is not to say that we have not had some wins. There have been some significant wins in the sector, but we are now at an extraordinary point in the history of early childhood education and care in this country, albeit because of some unacceptable behaviour and circumstances. A light has been shone on the large for-profit services. Now we have the chance to make changes. We have a willing commonwealth government and state and territory governments who are in lock-step. Positive change is happening. I certainly commit to keep the momentum going. Demanding quality early childhood education and care is the priority, not profits for shareholders. The ACT government commits to play its part, as well as continuing to push for national reform.

I would also say that, for the first time in the ACT government's history, the minister for planning formerly worked for the national organisation for early child education and care services, Early Childhood Australia, and is a parent of a child in early childhood education, and I am a long-time campaigner and organiser with their union. So we have two people who are passionate about early childhood education, particularly not-for-profit services. There are also for-profit services that are doing the right thing, and we should acknowledge those as well. But we need to make sure that our focus is not about profits for shareholders but about the quality of services in centres.

I am working with my colleagues across the ACT government, including in planning, to identify how we can further support not-for-profit early childhood education and care services and providers here in the ACT. Given the rapid market-driven growth in this sector, it is sensible to undertake demand-supply analysis for early childhood education centres across the whole of the ACT, including Belconnen. I thank and acknowledge the Greens for accepting my amendment to their motion to ensure that we cover the whole of the ACT. I will be pleased to do that work and look forward to tabling the results in the Assembly in March.

In the meantime, the ACT government will continue to provide support to not-for-profit early childhood education and care centres at risk of closing, as I have been doing with SDN Bluebell for some time. In fact, Labor made two key commitments during their election campaign: to explore measures to increase the number of not-for-profit early childhood education and care services in the ACT through future land release; and to ensure that all future early childhood education and care services in ACT government owned buildings are leased to not-for-profit or community providers below the market rate. Members will also be aware that the ACT government builds early childhood education and care services adjacent to new school builds. Those are operated by not-for-profit early childhood education and care services. In fact, the Strathnairn early childhood to primary school, which will be opening next year, have just completed the process for procurement of a provider for their early childhood education and care service. I do not have an announcement to make yet, but, in the coming weeks, I will look forward to announcing who that provider will be.

The amendment that I will move in just a moment reaffirms an important commitment to this sector—that the ACT government is providing and will continue to provide support to not-for-profit early childhood education and care services, which, as I said, we are currently doing. The ACT government will continue to work on strengthening support for not-for-profit providers so that we can sustain a thriving and high-quality early learning sector here in Canberra.

I again thank my colleagues Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay for their work on this motion. I welcome everybody's support for the national work that is happening in reform for early childhood education and care, particularly with regard to support for not-for-profit services. I welcome everybody to that campaign and encourage people to get in touch with organisations like Early Childhood Australia, the United Workers Union and educators who are campaigning for better support for these services and for themselves.

My amendment to Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay's motion replaces parts of the original motion and calls for provision of support to not-for-profit early childhood education and care centres like SDN Bluebell that are at risk of closing, such as assisting them in

finding an alternative site and providing support in navigating planning and regulatory processes. This is a discussion I had with SDN's CEO last week. I am happy to put that publicly as an amendment to the motion today. We commit to working with the not-for-profit early learning sector to explore measures to increase the number of not-for-profit early childhood education and care services in the ACT through future land release, and commit to increasing support for the not-for-profit and community-run early learning sector by ensuring that all future services in ACT government owned buildings are leased to not-for-profit or community providers at below market rate. That is my amendment to the initial motion.

I move the amendment that has been circulated in my name:

Omit all text after paragraph (3)(b), insert:

- “(c) provide support to not-for-profit ECEC centres like SDN Bluebell at risk of closing, such as assisting them in finding an alternate site and provide support in navigating planning and regulatory processes;
- (d) commit to working with the not-for-profit early learning sector to explore measures to increase the number of not-for-profit early childhood and education and care services in the ACT through future land release;
- (e) commit to increasing support for the not-for-profit and community-run early learning sector, by ensuring all future services in ACT Government owned buildings are leased to not-for-profit or community-providers at a below market rate.”.

In conclusion, whilst it is an unhappy event that SDN will be closing in 12 months, I am pleased that it has brought about a broader conversation in this place about early childhood education and care services, particularly in the not-for-profit community service operated space. I value the support of members in the Assembly to support services like SDN and will continue to work on improving services into the future and continuing the momentum of reform within this sector after the decades of work of those who came before us.

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) (4.50): I will not speak for long. It goes without saying that a childcare centre is so much more than a building. If there were ever any doubt, certainly the representations from the parents at SDN Bluebell, individually and collectively, would put that to bed. A childcare centre and all that it can provide cannot exist without a site, without a building. We all breathed a sigh of relief when the announcement of the extension of the lease, until the end of 2026, was made last week, but, as this motion and the amendment rightly note, that is far from the end of it.

I was certainly surprised to learn of the end-of-year closure when I returned from leave at the beginning of September. Indeed, I apologise to the families who reached out and have not heard from me yet in response to their representations. The announcement was while I was on leave throughout August, and, even though I have been back for three weeks, I am absolutely still playing catch-up. So, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I certainly apologise.

The extension to the lease buys time. This motion and the amendment outline how the government will use the time that is now available and the actions we will be able to take in this time. It has been an incredibly rough year for this sector. I think we would all reflect that, until today, we have had very few positive motions, perhaps no positive motions, or speeches when it comes to speaking about early childhood education and care. There are the things that we have seen and have been grappling with nationally, but also locally. It is incredibly refreshing to have had such a positive and outcomes-focused debate so far today, which I expect will continue. I certainly add my thanks for the spirit in which the motion has been negotiated and brought forward. Again, that reflects the positive and very determined representations from parents, as well as the standard of care that SDN Bluebell provides and represents, and, indeed, should modelled.

I am very pleased to support the motion and the amendment. I thank Ms Clay and Miss Nuttall for bringing it forward.

MR HANSON (Murrumbidgee) (4.52): The Canberra Liberals will be supporting this motion and the government amendment. It is great to see the support of all the local members who have been working on supporting Bluebell across the party lines. I too welcome the family members who are here today and congratulate them on their community advocacy that will hopefully have a happy ending. I have spoken to Colin, the operations manager at SDN. He has confirmed his understanding of things that have been reported, in terms of how the events have unfolded.

We certainly understand that there are important issues at play. We understand the importance of child care in the ACT and the role that these businesses play in people's lives, both in the not-for-profit sector, which the minister talked about, and in the for-profit sector. And we understand the important service they provide to the community—in this case, the very important role of Bluebell—which has been talked about by other members. As one parent noted, these services can make the difference between going back to work or continuing to search for care for their children. Many reported on the special nature of the care provided by SDN Bluebell. What I have heard here today certainly indicates that it is a very special centre, and I can understand why families are so keen to see the centre remain open.

Also, there is the developer, who is within their rights. They are allowed to submit applications, and we certainly want to see more housing across the ACT. There is no doubt about that. We talk about that regularly in this place. And there is a planning process at play. We have to make sure that we allow that to unfold appropriately. This motion certainly does not suggest interference with that; it just asks for information, which I think is appropriate. These are important needs. We certainly want to make sure that we have Bluebell and other childcare centres continuing to operate, but, equally, we need to balance that with the need for residential accommodation. We want to make sure that both of those needs can be balanced. I do not think anyone has come here suggesting that, collectively, we are anti-development. This is about making sure that we balance those needs. The motion, as it is laid out, is eminently reasonable in that regard. That is perhaps surprising from the Greens, but in this case it is.

We all welcome the fact that the lease has been extended. I note that the minister took credit for that. If she was responsible, well done, but, regardless, it is good news. The

amendment from the minister looks reasonable. It extends the intent of what the Greens were trying to achieve. It expands it and we will be supporting it.

With regard to Mr Emerson's amendment, which is yet to be tabled but has been circulated, I said to him this morning that we have the motion from the Greens and we have the amendment from the government, but we do not yet have the grandstanding amendment from Mr Emerson. You can guarantee that there will be a late-notice, grandstanding and attention-seeking amendment from Mr Emerson. It is fair to say that, no matter what the motion is, there will always be one of those. It often does not really value add and sometimes it distracts from the essence of the debate. I have seen that on a number of occasions. He just wants to have his bite of the cherry and get himself media attention—basically riding on the back of other people's hard work and community engagement and trying to get some attention. The amendment arrived, as I predicted. I do not think it helps, to be frank. Thankfully, it only asks for an exploration rather than anything definitive, so it is not going to do any harm. We do not want to have an amendment that is talking about oversaturation of the market by for-profits.

Let's not demonise for-profit centres. We want to have both in this environment. We have to make sure that we are providing child care for parents. We do not want to be anti-business and we certainly do not want to be in a situation where we are making it harder for for-profit centres to operate. If the place is oversaturated, maybe that is a good thing for parents. I remember us being in this place a while ago when there were not enough childcare services in certain places. We really wanted more childcare centres. We encouraged childcare centres, be it for profit or not for profit. We cannot come into this place now and start demonising them, saying there is oversaturation. We support choice. We support business. We want to have that available for parents.

It is a grandstanding amendment from an attention-seeking member who, it seems, comes in here on every single motion with last-minute amendments that often provide little value to what has actually been substantially addressed. He did it to my motion a while back. I asked him not to. Key stakeholders and others, and I, did not want him to move that amendment. He did it anyway. He wanted to get the attention. He is doing it again today. I will not be supporting his amendment.

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER: Mr Hanson, please address your comments to the chair.

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (4.58): I want to thank Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay for bringing this motion forward. I think it carries the comments and expectations of the parents. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the parents as well, and echo Miss Nuttall's comments around how tenacious this group of parents are. They had an objective, they had a goal, and they kept going towards the goal until they achieved results.

For most parents, this is probably the only thing that they would be asking the government to do for them. Generally, Canberrans are self-reliant. This might be the only thing that parents would ask the government to assist with, in ensuring that their children continue to attend a centre that is safe, that is supportive and that meets their needs. This is not a big ask.

While I recognise that Bluebell is a not-for-profit organisation, I think there are a few

levers that can be pulled in this space to make sure that parents have that safety net of a childcare centre to which parents can send their children and not feel guilty because their children will not be properly looked after. Parents should be confident that, when they drop their kids off at a childcare centre, they will be well looked after. That is what Bluebell represents.

We have heard a lot in the Assembly about the exceptional services that Bluebell provides. Mr Deputy Speaker, as a parent, again, I cannot tell you how important it is that you have that environment where you know your child will be safe. In the words of one of the parents, and echoed by many, he said:

Thousands of Canberrans, particularly in Belconnen, have built connections to Bluebell through their own early learning experience or through family and friends. Bluebell is a model of how Canberra childcare centres should be run. Many staff have been at Bluebell for at least 10 or 20 years. Consequently, the loss of Bluebell will have an adverse effect on not just the parents, but the staff and community more broadly.

I was pleased that, after representations were made to the government, a solution, although temporary, was found to keep Bluebell operating. I understand, as I have indicated, that Bluebell is a not-for-profit business, but there are things that, hopefully, the government can do to ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of Bluebell.

However, this issue, and the closure of the Capital Region Community Services Belconnen Early Childhood Centre at the Canberra Institute of Technology in May, points to a serious defect in the ACT planning regime. It seems that the government is committed to a vision where everything is seen as real estate. I absolutely support more homes and more housing. However, as has been indicated by Mr Hanson, there needs to be a balance. We cannot develop at all costs. Development needs to serve the community. The needs of Canberra should be at the heart of any decision that we make. In this case, the needs of the developer could have trumped the needs of families and young children.

As members in this place, we need to ask ourselves whether the planning system settings are right, if it is not serving the needs of the people who live here. While I am not a lover of red tape, placing obligations on developers to work with leaseholders and develop strategies for the continuity of businesses affected by redevelopment might be something that we need to consider. It is not sufficient for developers to say, "You've been on a succession of short-term leases, so there should be no surprises." That is not adequate notice for the community or support for the continuity of businesses.

We know that there are unscrupulous developers working in the ACT who are prepared to ignore the terms of their leases and construct premises that are inconsistent with planning approvals. We must ask why this keeps happening. Perhaps we do need to put robust and enforceable obligations into the planning regime and have a credible cop on the beat to force developers to do the right thing. Such an obligation might have been of considerable benefit to those businesses so adversely affected by the light rail construction. But I digress.

Childcare centres are important. They are important for the education and development of our children. That has been clearly articulated in the debate in this place. They are important for parents, who need somewhere for their children to stay, so that they can

work.

In the context of concerns, and with the acknowledgement that not-for-profit centres generally provide a better-quality environment, the loss of CRCS CIT childcare centre and the near-loss of Bluebell represent an emerging crisis. Keeping not-for-profit centres like SDN Bluebell in the market is of public benefit and interest. The preservation of high-quality, community-focused not-for-profit child care is essential to ensuring long-term equity and integrity in early childhood education.

At a time when national productivity is low, it is important that we do everything we can to ensure that parents who want to return to work can be properly supported to do so. I will echo the words of a parent who came to meet with me. She said, “I’m scheduled to go back to work soon, but I simply can’t if the centre closes. I have already called my supervisor and explained the situation to them.”

SDN Bluebell is a vital example of what early childhood learning should look like, and it must be protected. Not-for-profit child care needs to remain to ensure that the current issues in the sector do not get worse and subsequently require even bigger government intervention.

I note that the government’s own childcare policy envisages “that in the future early childhood education and care will be considered a force for social good, by policy and lawmakers, by the sector, and by the community. When early childhood education is seen as a social good, rather than an economic tool or business opportunity, children’s outcomes will be at the centre”. Sadly, though, it appears that the government’s planning and development activities do not seem to align with this message.

Once again, I thank Ms Clay and Miss Nuttall for bringing this motion to the Assembly. I again commend the tireless advocacy of parents, and I hope that we get to an outcome that everybody is happy with, including the parents. I commend the motion to the Assembly, and I support the motion, as amended.

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (5.07): I want to thank Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay for bringing this motion before the Assembly today, and for the amendment from Ms Berry. I thank her and Ms Cheyne for their supportive statements. It is wonderful to see the Canberra Liberals getting behind supporting this important and much-loved childcare centre. I certainly want to acknowledge the parents and children who have been here this afternoon. I think that at least one of you came up to me in the shops and thanked me for my efforts. Thank you for that; I will come and say hello a bit later.

I made a speech on this matter yesterday afternoon. For all those who want to read my substantive speech, in which I addressed the news from last week, they will find it on my Facebook page. It can also be found in the *Hansard*.

My most direct connection and advocacy—and I want to thank my Canberra Liberals colleagues for our joint support for this—related particularly to the petition that was brought to me by some of the families who use the Bluebell service. That petition, which started on 2 September, this month, has reached 580 signatures. I want to thank the parents for advocating for that, because getting 500 or more signatures means that the relevant standing committee will need to consider this petition, so there is something

further that can happen here. The relevant standing committee will have to consider this petition and see whether it warrants an inquiry.

Despite some good news last week, as announced by the leaseholder, and as we are seeing announced here today, with this motion, which I believe will be supported, I am hopeful that all of our colleagues will support the government amendment, because I think it is in line with the actual terms of the petition which the community have brought to me. It is not just that the government is happy that there will be an extension until the end of the year, but that the government will provide support to Bluebell, such as “assisting them in finding an alternative site”, which is very much the lead “call on” in the petition that I am sponsoring. It highlights a potential site in Cook, but there are other sites in Belconnen. I know that it is the wish of the families that they have something that is not too distant from where they are currently taking their children—ideally, as close to the town centre as possible, as it is such a strong transport and shopping hub.

I do want to say about the petition, “It ain’t over yet.” Frankly, getting over 500 signatures is a great achievement. The more numbers that support any issue, for example, by way of a petition, strengthens the government’s resolve to do something about it. We politicians do attend to numbers, as I said yesterday in my speech. We do take note of numbers, because we are in a democratic system. The more members of the community that are advocating for something, quite frankly, the more we should pay attention to the issue and see what the appropriate action is.

It was lovely to visit the site a few weeks ago, because I thought, “I’ll get a photo of the lovely ‘Save Bluebell’ sign; I’ll put that on my socials.” I ended up finding something better than my photos and created a tile for people to go to the petition. I am very grateful to the people who saw that tile, who saw the petition on the Legislative Assembly website, and who got the number of signatures over the 500 mark.

It was great to meet with some of the parents, as I have already touched on, while I have been out and about, doorknocking and doing mobile offices at the shops. I want to give some credit to the government. The two members who have spoken are both members for the electorate as well. Again, we see this dynamic of a portfolio responsibility overlapping with a local member responsibility. It does somewhat strengthen the resolve.

I want to finish by repeating what I called for yesterday afternoon, in acknowledging the good news of the extension of the lease and the fact that there would be an alternative site found by someone before the end of next year; if found earlier, they will occupy that alternative site. I want to repeat a few things that I said yesterday, because they have been very closely reflected in what the government has brought forward, building on this very worthy motion.

While today I celebrate this important reprieve for Bluebell, I also call on the government to act decisively and ensure that community facilities are made available for community purposes. The government has a clear choice. It can allow uncertainty to linger until 2026, or it can take steps now to provide Bluebell with the security of a permanent home.

I want to thank the government for putting that very positive responsibility on the government—not just waiting to see what happens but actually providing some assistance and helping Bluebell. We will be keeping an eye on that, to make sure that is really followed through, subject to the passing of this amendment to the motion.

Again, I want to thank my colleagues, particularly Ms Barry, for working with me. We have been working together as fellow Ginninderra members on this issue. I want to thank the shadow portfolio holder, Mr Hanson, for his support. I look forward to keeping an eye on the government's assistance to Bluebell to help them find an alternative site.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (5.14): I wish to acknowledge the stress and uncertainty that families face when their child care closes and congratulate the families here on their terrific advocacy. Obviously, the primary objective is to support children and families, as opposed to profit. I welcome the minister's support for not-for-profit centres through land release and to charge below market rent.

Quality early learning cannot be achieved without a stable, supported workforce and access to services, so it is important that they are located across Canberra. Co-location of not-for-profit centres with schools is a great outcome, so let us have more of that across the primary school system, even in the older schools.

I thank Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay for bringing forward this motion. I want to thank Mr Emerson for his significant contribution to debates in this Assembly.

Ms Berry's amendment agreed to.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (5.16), by leave: I move:

1. After paragraph (1)(c), insert:

“(d) when a new ECEC centre is planned for development in the ACT, the planning process does not require consideration of need, viability, or impact on existing centres. The existing planning laws disproportionately advantage for-profit ECEC providers and price-out not-for-profit providers, leading to oversaturation of the market by for-profit providers in some areas;”.

2. After paragraph (3)(b), insert:

“(c) explore legislative planning reform options to prevent oversaturation of the ECEC market and safeguard the commercial viability of not-for-profit centres;”.

Mr Speaker, I would like to thank Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay for bringing this motion forward and for their advocacy for the families, children and educators at SDN Bluebell. Like the affected families and educators, I was pleased to hear the recent announcement that the centre will continue to be supported to operate in the short term. As other members have said, I welcome the families who are in the gallery. I welcome the babbling and the quiet shushes; you can still hear the whispers. It makes me feel like I am at home. I have two young children, and it is comforting.

Unfortunately, like so many other not-for-profit providers, SDN Bluebell's longer term

future remains unclear. I fully back the motion's calls both to find a permanent solution for this centre and to ensure that the broader not-for-profit sector is supported so that services do remain viable in the ACT.

I greatly appreciated the opportunity to attend the recent roundtable mentioned in the motion, which was organised by Miss Nuttall with the Children First Alliance, an alliance of not-for-profit early childhood education and care providers.

I will be focusing my brief remarks today on a broader issue, of which this is somewhat of an example, which was raised at that roundtable; that is, the deliberate, forward-looking strategic planning that is needed to safeguard the viability of the not-for-profit early childhood sector in the ACT. Between March 2015 and March 2023, for-profit providers increased by 62 per cent in the ACT. At the same time, services operated by not-for-profit providers decreased, which might not be inherently bad, as Mr Hanson indicated, but I think it is at least telling.

I have heard that this shift has been made possible by the ACT's planning and competition rules. This is not the whole story, but it is certainly part of it. When a new centre is planned for development in the ACT, there is no consideration of need, viability or impact on existing centres. This has resulted, in some areas, in an over-saturated market in which not-for-profit providers simply cannot compete.

While major for-profit providers, and particularly those backed by private equity, are able to absorb a period of operating below capacity, the viability of not-for-profit providers can be threatened if their centres are reduced even to 85 per cent capacity or lower. Big providers swoop in, absorb the temporary loss, compete on costs rather than quality, and the existing not-for-profit provider falls over.

For example, I am told there are six services operating within one kilometre in Woden town centre. In its consultation report released after the recent forum, Children First Alliance said that circumstances like these—and I quote:

... place additional strain on an already limited workforce where the number of available staff does not match the number of licensed services. When market pressures and property dynamics disproportionately advantage for-profit providers, it risks undermining the core purpose of the sector.

This can have disastrous consequences. And what are the consequences? I recently had a conversation with a not-for-profit provider who had been moved from a peppercorn lease to a commercial lease. It had threatened their viability. They raised the issue with the landlord, and the landlord's proposed solution was to cut costs by hiring less-qualified staff. This economic calculation that puts our children after dollars and cents does not make sense to me, and it is an ethos that we need to avoid at all costs.

The fact remains that not-for-profit providers must remain financially viable if the industry is going to succeed. If the minister's call for children to be put ahead of profit, which I welcome, genuinely and warmly, is to be heeded, we cannot just cross our fingers and hope for the best. We need to put in place measures to ensure that this actually happens. That is why I am very happy to see this motion brought to the Assembly today.

Other jurisdictions have planning constraints that limit competition and ensure the commercial viability of the things they want to see survive. This is something that multiple local not-for-profit providers absolutely want to see considered in this place, when it comes to early childhood education and care. That is why I have focused my amendments and remarks today on this issue—not to grandstand, but to play my role in echoing community voices that wish to be heard in this place.

I take the fair cop about process and timing. I am happy to take that from Mr Hanson. I do intend, though, to continue taking seriously my responsibility to advocate for our community, a responsibility that we all have, and to do the things I am expected to do and paid to do by our community—moving amendments, submitting questions and participating actively in estimates hearings, in order to play my part in ensuring that this Assembly works hard for our community and for people like those in the gallery today who are here to see us debate the matter at hand.

There is a lot of discussion happening about how we ensure safety and quality education in the early childhood education and care sector, and how we support fantastic educators and providers in the ACT. A strong profit motive does cloud those discussions. We have an opportunity here in Canberra, as we have a larger proportion of not-for-profit providers than in other jurisdictions, as well as a number of smaller for-profit centres that do have really good practices in place to prioritise the safety, wellbeing and growth of children—centres that are going above and beyond.

I believe we should be asking genuine questions about whether the ACT is a place where we want some of the major for-profit providers to be able to flood the market with lower quality offerings, or whether there is a need for real intervention here to support the kind of sector that we want for Canberran children, families, educators and the high-quality providers that are modelling best practice.

With that in mind, I again thank Miss Nuttall and Ms Clay for bringing forward this motion. I welcome Ms Berry's constructive amendment, which clearly focuses on the question that I am raising in my remarks and offers some solid commitments, which my amendments are also aimed at complementing.

I thank members for their focused advocacy on what is clearly a fantastic centre in SDN Bluebell, and I commend my amendments to the Assembly.

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage and Minister for Transport) (5.22): I am pleased to speak in support of the amended motion, as well as Mr Emerson's amendments to the amended motion.

As Minister Berry mentioned, over the last couple of decades I have worked in and out of government, both ACT and federal, and for the peak body Early Childhood Australia, which has, as one of its members, the SDN early childhood service, which is well known as a quality early childhood provider. It has operated in the ACT for around 30 years, as well as across New South Wales. I have had the great opportunity to visit a number of those centres over the years, and I have been impressed by the level of care and education being provided to young children during a critical time in their

development.

We know how important quality early childhood education and care is for children's development. With an 18-month-old daughter in an early childhood service, it is really important, I know, for her and, of course, for our family, and in terms of workforce participation as well.

As the minister for planning, I am very cognisant of the need to continue to look at and plan for the provision of these important pieces of social infrastructure that provide the opportunity for quality early childhood providers, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, to be able to operate in the ACT. At the election ACT Labor brought forward an election commitment to commit to exploring opportunities for land release for not-for-profit early childhood centres across the ACT, recognising that, in some areas of the ACT, there are less of these not-for-profit centres, and there is the need specifically to identify land for this purpose, to provide this important community infrastructure and service for the ACT in a range of different areas.

We are undertaking that work. I am proactively identifying blocks of land that we can bring forward in the housing supply and land release program. Typically, these blocks are zoned for community facilities under the Territory Plan. Of course, under a wide range of the Territory Plan's zones, early childhood services are permitted. A good example of how early childhood services are permitted in a commercial zone is where this service is currently located, at 44 College Street, which is a CZ2 business zone that permits early childhood as a land use.

I am happy to come back from the Territory Planning Authority, which is an independent authority under the Planning Act, with some advice, as requested in the motion, about compliance with conditions of the current Crown lease at 44 College Street, which is also known as block 16 section 45 Belconnen.

However, I also want to be really clear that I have been advised that the Crown lease permits a childcare centre, but the lease does not require it. The Crown lease also permits a range of other uses, and that includes car park, community use, residential, restaurant and shop uses within that commercial zone. Of course, any lessee is able to come forward and, through a development application, potentially change their lease, as long as it is consistent with the broader Territory Plan, and where the broader land use is permitted in the zone, which, as I said, is CZ2.

I can confirm that a development application for this site is currently being considered by the Territory Planning Authority. As this is being assessed by the independent authority, I will not comment further at this stage. I am aware that there are a range of conditions for the site that both the Territory Planning Authority and I are aware of. They will assess any applications or consider regulatory action in line with the Planning Act and regulations.

I note that the amended motion also calls for support for not-for-profit early childhood centres. I am aware that there is a need to continue to look at opportunities for more land there. I make the comment that I actually agree with Mr Hanson, which is rare in this chamber, in relation to one of the key imperatives in early childhood policy, which has been around accessibility, and particularly around making sure that there are more

early childhood spaces for children, because they have been scarce, and continue to be scarce in many parts of Canberra.

The key response to that policy concern has been focused on enabling more places to be provided for community use, not just through land release but through a range of other mechanisms as well.

I note that Mr Emerson's amendments go in a different direction, in asking the government to consider restricting places. That is typically not what governments have considered, when trying to address childcare accessibility. When I worked for the federal government, we commissioned a piece of work—I was working for the federal minister for early childhood and employment—to be undertaken by the University of Technology Sydney Centre for Local Government, called *Best practice guideline for the planning and development of childcare facilities*.

That report is about 243 pages long, and—credit to Mr Emerson—does have a strong focus on strategic planning for early childhood services. It also has a strong focus on enabling services, enabling places, rather than having restrictions in planning law. That is effectively the bible for early childhood planning law and policy in Australia. The report itself notes that there is not a huge amount of other literature on this topic. This is something that we will consider against this best practice guideline, as part of what has been called for in Mr Emerson's amendments to Miss Nuttall's motion.

The other thing that I want to note is, of course, that we will have to consider that amendment in light of our commitments around the Intergovernmental Agreement on National Competition Policy, which is an important agreement that we have long signed up to, that makes sure that, in any major decisions that relate to local government, land use, planning frameworks or policies, we must consider any material impact on competition, as part of that.

That relates not just to competition between government early childhood services—we do operate a number of government preschools in the ACT, which is very different to other states and territories around Australia—but also to competition between early childhood providers. That includes competition between not-for-profit providers, not just between for-profit and not-for-profit providers.

The Labor government is committed to providing opportunities for not-for-profit providers, particularly through land release. We will look at the opportunities there. There is a scarcity of land, particularly for community facilities, around the ACT, and particularly in the Belconnen region. We will certainly do our best to look at what opportunities are available. I know Minister Berry is looking at that, in terms of the areas for which she has responsibility, particularly in the new estates and subdivisions that are being planned for in the ACT.

Mr Emerson's amendments agreed to.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (5.31): In closing, I want to thank everyone for their support of our motion and for the support of SDN Bluebell. This is a centre that has touched many lives through its 30 years, and I am not surprised to see that so many people support its continued service in north Canberra.

Again, for any positive outcomes that come from this motion, I think every ounce of credit goes to the families and educators who have advocated for it. This is their win, but we all benefit, which is great. I want to make sure that we do not stop here. I am certain everyone here has heard of other centres in their electorates that have suffered from similar issues, and many of those stories have not ended well. We need to provide more support for early childhood education and care centres, especially when we are seeing the negative impact that their closure has on all Canberrans.

Early childhood is an essential stage of development and it needs support. Not every family has the resources to have someone to stay home to care for young children. All Canberrans should have access to qualified professionals who can provide high-quality early childhood education and care. We need to make sure the centres providing that are giving all the support we can possibly provide.

I do not want this to end at the calls I have listed in this motion, and I do not want this to end with SDN Bluebell being given a permanent future. It is a good start. I want us to strive to be a territory is a welcoming and supportive environment for not-for-profit, high-quality education and care. New and old providers alike should know that, if they face hardship, the ACT government has their back. Families should not have to start worrying about a place for their children while they are still pregnant. There is a more significant role for the ACT government to play in supporting the sector and individual centres.

I would really like to thank the parents and the kiddos who joined us in the in the gallery today. For those that stuck around, I hope that the dulcet tones of conciliatory debate have been a nice background for your snoozing—kids and possibly parents alike. Thank you all for coming here after a long day. You have been absolutely fantastic, and I hope that you have a lot of fun when you go home this afternoon too.

I sincerely hope, in the spirit of this motion and the unbelievably hard work of the SDN Bluebell community, that this inspires us all to set the bar high and strive to achieve the best we possibly can. Thank you to everyone for making this happen.

MR SPEAKER: From the chair, can I say it is a great pleasure of ours to have families in the gallery. It is also fascinating that, on balance, the under-sixes are probably better behaved than the members.

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: I was not looking at you, Mr Hanson.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

Leave of absence

Motion (by **Mr Cocks**) agreed to:

That leave of absence be granted to Ms Lee for this sitting day due to personal reasons.

Papers

Motion to take note of papers

MR SPEAKER: Pursuant to standing order 211A, I propose the question:

That the papers presented under standing order 211 during presentation of papers in the routine of business today be noted.

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) (5.35): In the interests of time, I table the following paper:

The journey to pro-disclosure: Statutory Review of the Freedom of Information Act 2016 (ACT)—Tabling statement, dated September 2025.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Appropriation Bill 2025-2026

Schedule 1—Appropriations—Proposed expenditure.

Debate resumed.

Canberra Health Services—Part 1.11.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Canberra Institute of Technology—Part 1.12.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (5.37): I rise to speak very briefly on the CIT in my capacity as the ACT Greens spokesperson for education. The ACT Greens support the CIT and the work it does to ensure Canberra has the capacity to upskill people from all backgrounds. There are many areas in Canberra that are crying out for people with specific skillsets, and the CIT fills an absolutely indispensable role in helping fill those. The ACT government must continue to fund this institution to ensure we can provide education, upskilling and opportunity more broadly to the largest number of Canberrans.

There have certainly been some concerns from the community about the direction CIT is moving in. I know some staff have expressed discomfort in the way CIT appears to be attempting to move most courses to being available entirely online. There appears, right now, to not quite be the amount of support we might hope for, with many people who fear they are going to be made redundant by this process and a lack of support for providing educators with the skills necessary to provide vocational education online.

In regards to upskilling, we are also a bit concerned that the CIT is not providing vocational educators with adequate support to take the time they need to keep their skills up to date. Being a vocational educator means that you need to have full expertise

in your field, including in newer developments. This is essential for the students but also for any educators who might wish to return to their field. Being at CIT pays far less than many of these very skilled and passionate people could make in their respective trades, and we need to make sure that their choice to work in education is not one that has a negative impact in their long-term career development.

During estimates, we heard from CIT that educators would be funded for their professional development but that the onus would still be on them to seek a workload reduction if they were not able to complete that fair volume of PD outside of their existing face-to-face hours. Guaranteeing paid time for them to undertake professional development would be a great start as would having adequate staffing to cover for any teaching gaps that might be created as a result.

Ultimately, we need to see more consultation between the CIT leadership and staff. I completely understand that we have new leadership at the CIT—and I think that is exciting. We have an opportunity for a fresh start. I hope to see the ACT government open to additional funding to support CIT staff as need is identified over the coming years.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (5.39): I am pleased to rise and speak in support of the investment we are making in the Canberra Institute of Technology as part of my skills, training and industrial relations portfolio.

CIT is the heart of our vocational training system in the ACT. We recognise the central role it plays in teaching the in-demand skills our city needs as it continues to grow. Whether someone is starting out in their career, looking to gain new skills for one already underway or thinking of a new direction, CIT is the place where all Canberrans can get the skills that they need to succeed. This budget continues to support CIT in this vital work.

As I have spoken to the Assembly about previously, CIT Woden represents a generational investment in our public TAFE for Canberra. It provides a world-class learning and teaching environment with dedicated facilities, including a full commercial kitchen and restaurant, photography studio, TV sound stage, hairdressing and beauty therapy centre and textiles workshop. I am pleased to share with the Assembly that this now includes the TAFE Centre for Excellence in Cyber Security, which they announced with the Federal Minister for Skills and Training, Andrew Giles, on the most recent Monday.

We are investing \$4.5 million through this budget in campus operationalisation to ensure students get the most out of their campus and these facilities. This funding will support CIT to maintain the building's six green star energy rating, make the most of their smart campus technology and support the co-located youth foyer as part of our goal to build a sustainable, integrated TAFE learning precinct. The ACT government will continue to invest in CIT to ensure that we have a responsive, resilient and future-focused public TAFE provider.

The ACT government remains committed to growing our total workforce to 300,000

people by 2030. To do this, we need workers, equipped with skills and training that is innovative and forward thinking and people with skills that are ready to meet the needs of our economy as it continues to grow. To make sure CIT succeeds in this challenge, we are investing \$8 million in CIT's digital infrastructure. With this, we are modernising CIT's learning and teaching environments, ensuring that CIT systems are future-ready.

This investment will allow CIT to move away from legacy ICT systems, enabling a flexible and accessible ICT environment that is ready to scale. This will support CIT in delivering a better student digital experience, smoother registration processes and a more resilient ICT environment. A key example of this is the improvements to digital timetabling for semester 2 in 2025, replacing the fragmented, partly manual process. CIT can now maximise campus utilisation centrally and allow students to subscribe to their personalised timetables. This will ultimately provide a more flexible, integrated experience.

Further to this, we are proud that CIT is now the host of two TAFE Centres of Excellence. As part of the National Skills Agreement, TAFE Centres of Excellence are being founded in partnership between the commonwealth and state and territory governments to act as the hub of best practice for TAFE learning. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the work of Treasurer Chris Steel when he was skills minister in standing up the ACT government's part that we will play under the National Skills Agreement.

This work we are undertaking in partnership with the federal government represents what Labor governments across Australia know: skilling people and giving them the tools they need to succeed in life is vital. It is the cornerstone to a strong economy and a fulfilling career. We know this and that only Labor governments will continue to invest in this. That is why we are investing \$24 million in matched funding towards these centres of excellence, to ensure that TAFEs right across Australia are adopting and sharing the very best in vocational teaching practice.

Our very own CIT is host to Australia's first electric vehicle TAFE Centre of Excellence, creating and sharing the most up-to-date EV knowledge and training right across Australia, providing a hub where, as Australians and Canberrans adopt EVs more and more, we can provide the skills needed to support this important part of the clean energy transition. This includes the EV Educator Upskill Project, ensuring existing teachers and trainers know the latest in EV teaching, as well as the EV Training Roadshow, where the Centre of Excellence goes out into Australia's regions, providing training to workforce wherever they may be. This is all part of the National Skills Agreement's work to ensure Australia has the skills that our economy needs as it continues to grow.

As I mentioned earlier, CIT is now home to the TAFE Centre of Excellence in Cyber Security. This Centre of Excellence is exciting. It represents a brilliant opportunity to bring together our tertiary sector, industry and government to provide the best in cybersecurity skilling and learning opportunities. As identified by the Future Skills Organisation, Australia faces a shortfall of 61,000 digital workers by 2030, and cyber threats continue to grow at an alarming rate. Put simply, Australia needs more cybersecurity professionals. The TAFE Centre of Excellence for Cyber Security will

play a key role in meeting this critical skills shortage.

Based at our Woden campus, \$5 million in matched funding will go towards this critical initiative. It will leverage Canberra's unique placement as Australia's cybersecurity hub, where defence, national security agencies and technology companies converge to work on protecting Australia's critical infrastructure. Here we will find best practice, provide an incubator for applied research and explore the frontier of cybersecurity, including by working in partnership with our TAFE Centre of Excellence for Electric Vehicles on the cybersecurity of EVs.

It is an exciting time for CIT, and the ACT government will continue to invest in ensuring it remains a responsive, resilient and future-focused TAFE that our community can count on.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (5.46): I wanted to rise briefly to mention the esteem with which we hold our vocational education centre and the CIT, which is at the heart of that sector in the ACT. I went to the opening of the Woden CIT—a welcome return to Woden for CIT after some years since the original Woden CIT campus was closed. One of the repeated phrases throughout that opening was the idea of the parity of esteem, the idea that people should be encouraged and, indeed, well regarded for choosing to pursue training and then a career that is vocational, not just through the traditional tertiary university sector. I absolutely support this idea because, for too many young people, when they are facing decisions about their life pathway, the assumption is that the only successful way to progress through life is through university and then, for many in Canberra, the assumption is, into the public service.

Frankly, we need traders, we need people working in information technology, we need people progressing through a vocational sector that adequately supports them to achieve their objectives and the lifestyle that they are looking for, rather than funnelling everyone into the same pathway whether or not it fits them and indeed what the community needs, because our economy clearly has seen deficit in not just them, but the number of people entering into our vocational streams. We need to have those people who are going to build the houses that Canberrans need. We need the people who are going to service the cars.

I am very pleased to hear about the progress on an EV training pathway. It is something that is desperately needed. It was needed before the government decided that they were going to take steps to move the ACT away from being able to sell traditional cars, but it is needed even more now. Over time, I have heard considerable concern from the motor servicing sector about the capacity of the ACT to actually deliver this. I am genuinely hopeful that the CIT will become a centre, not just for the ACT; it could become a centre for Australia in leading this in-demand area of workforce. But it needs to be delivered. Positive words in this place are a start but, if you will forgive the pun, the rubber really hits the road in CIT and then as people transition from CIT into the workforce.

CIT should be a fantastic central part of the vision for Canberra's future, because we need people moving into all sorts of sectors. We have some concerns. We have concerns about CIT potentially running at a deficit, adding to all of the other financial management concerns that we have raised already. We think it is absolutely critical that

we support this vital part of our economy.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

City Renewal Authority—Part 1.13.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (5.50): Just briefly in this line item, I wish to highlight the work the City Renewal Authority will be undertaking to improve lighting in the city centre, particularly around City Walk, East Row, Ainslie Place and Petrie Plaza. This budget funds work to improve safety, night atmosphere and boost accessibility. There will also be public realm upgrades in those precincts. The Garema Place project is progressing well. I had a wander around today at lunchtime. There is a lot of activity on the site, with the hope that that is concluded well ahead of the peak Christmas trading period.

I also briefly highlight works that will be undertaken by the authority around City Hill, as in the park itself or the future park. A concept design master plan will be developed by the CRA over the coming period. This has been informed by the City Hill ideas exhibition, the public ideas exhibition, that took place about 12 to 18 months ago. There is a lot of land release around that City Hill site. It should be more than just a giant roundabout with more rabbits than people; it should be a place of recreation for a growing city population. Clearly, part of that, though, is making the site more accessible. We have already done that with signalised pedestrian crossings, but there will clearly be more connectivity to that site as more development occurs around it.

The final area to highlight here is the work the CRA will be doing with the University of New South Wales Canberra in relation to their new campus. I would anticipate works commencing on that in the not too distant future. I will of course issue an appropriate public statement at the commencement of that very significant project for our city. With that, I commend the CRA appropriation to the Assembly.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (5.53): The ACT Greens want a thriving entertainment and hospitality sector in every town centre to support our artists and particularly to ensure that live music can thrive all across Canberra. We took to the election a commitment to establish precincts in consultation with the community to protect the long-term future of the music and entertainment industry without exposing residents or businesses to unreasonable or unexpected levels of noise.

We need these entertainment precincts and we need them to be serviced with great public transport, late night food and hospitality options, good lighting and an atmosphere that brings each area to life. We really get that through bodies like the CRA. But, given the CRA's limited reach, we do not get activations and renewal investment in other town centres like Belconnen, Woden, Gungahlin and Tuggeranong.

We heard from Greater Canberra on community day during the estimates that town centres deserve the same level of engagement as the city centre. Community councils echoed this too. They want to see more holistic planning and investment to renew and revitalise our town centres and to prevent underutilised spaces like Margaret Timpson Park from being neglected for a really long period of time until there is enough fuss to

get attention. The ACT Labor government should serve all of Canberra, not just our city centre and the inner north. It would be great to see them work with different town centres and businesses to see whether a renewal authority can be established in these other areas.

This idea has been kicked around quite a bit over the years. I understand some of the resistance was to government funding and some was to whether we should ask businesses to contribute. We note that the City Renewal Authority does get a small component of its contributions from the businesses in the area—and that is certainly a great model—but it is getting quite a lot of government funding too. I think our other town centres would benefit from similar models.

It is particularly important as government is now looking at expanding the entertainment districts. While we are expanding those, we really need to make sure that we are supporting the precincts as well so that they are accessible, engaging and easily activated. As part of that work, it would be great if the government could also ensure that we are tapping into local businesses for those activations. That can help create a stronger sense of community, it can generate new customers for their businesses and their services and it can provide much more engaging experiences for our people who are living around those areas and visiting them.

In terms of housing, the Greens would love to see the City Renewal Authority take a swifter approach to Dickson section 72. That is a great location for housing. It is close to the shops, schools, light rail and other local amenities. We saw some great initiatives as part of that project, including Common Ground, which is providing social housing close to services in the city. With an agreement from government to set city limits and to deliver more homes within our existing footprint, this is exactly the kind of project that we need—and we need to finish that project.

Just last week, the Greens bill to enshrine housing as a human right passed. It is really important that, in a housing crisis, when we have recognised that housing is a fundamental human right, we take all the action we can to get more of the homes, particularly the social, the community and the public homes, in all our centres.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (5.56): I also support thriving town centres and entertainment precincts. I welcome the Woden CIT, but there has been no attempt to integrate it into the local area. The CIT enterprises are only open for very short hours during the school term. They are not activating the local area. The new Youth Foyer, which of course we also support, has blank walls onto the court of Woden. The planning is non-existent. So, while I support the CRA, I would like to see that level of renewal across other parts of Canberra too.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Legal Aid Commission (ACT)—Part 1.14.

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) (5.57): Legal Aid ACT is a vital part of our justice system, providing vulnerable and disadvantaged Canberrans with access to justice

through a range of legal aid services. In this budget, the ACT government is continuing to invest in legal aid through recurrent funding and additional investment and resources.

I appreciate what Mr Hanson is probably about to say, but I think it is worth recognising the additional resourcing that is being provided, including the establishment of the 10th magistrate and the additional funding that is being provided for Legal Aid through that, and additional funding to support Legal Aid's ongoing engagement with the ACT intermediary scheme.

There is funding to maintain legal assistance grants at 120 per cent of the Henderson poverty line, supporting those who would ordinarily be considered too rich to qualify for legal aid, but are too poor to afford private legal representation. There is funding for Legal Aid duty lawyers to attend the children's care and protection intensive list, and funding to continue Legal Aid's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse liaison officers.

As recognised elsewhere in the debate, legal sector resources require our constant attention. I do appreciate the attention that is being afforded by the Assembly and, I expect, through future budget processes like this one. I do acknowledge the advocacy of the CEO so that access to justice is assured. In doing so, I also recognise the incredible work of the staff throughout the organisation, which does not get enough attention. I had hoped to give them a bit more attention in this speech; but, in the interests of time, I will seek to expand on their incredible work at a later date.

MR HANSON (Murrumbidgee) (5.59): I have an excellent speech here, written by my staff. There has been a lot said about Legal Aid of late. I spoke about it in this debate under JACS; we had a motion as well. I will hold the minister to the comments that she made during the debate. She has recognised the important work of Legal Aid. She has recognised that they are under budget pressures, as other areas of government perhaps have expanded. I refer to the point that I made before, about the need to rebalance the scales of justice, to make sure that, if we increase the number of magistrates, and if we increase funding for the DPP, our most vulnerable people who receive legal support through Legal Aid need that additional support as well.

I look forward to hearing back from the government about that additional support. I welcome the responsiveness. I have made comments about the way that we had a budget presented; then, shortly afterwards, we have said, "Okay, we got it wrong; we need to make some changes." I have been critical of that. But if that does eventuate in more funding for those very important organisations, I welcome this government and the minister's commitment to that.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (6.01): We had a debate about this last week in the Assembly, so I also do not intend to make extensive comments. The critical role of Legal Aid is well understood in this chamber and has had a good ventilation in recent times. I would like particularly to focus on the comments made by Dr Boersig, the head of Legal Aid, in estimates about the need to revisit the legal aid threshold for eligibility to reflect income growth over recent years.

The Greens took to the 2024 election an ambitious community safety initiative that included a plan to raise the income threshold to \$498 per week, which is 120 per cent

of the June 2022 quarter Henderson poverty line. We believe this could have addressed the current gap in access to legal services for around 120 low income members of the ACT community per year who do not qualify for legal aid but cannot afford private legal representation. That is the approach we took.

The bottom line is that the threshold is problematic, and we need to see funding for Legal Aid so that it can represent more people who are too poor for private representation, but too secure for legal aid grants in its current iteration. This justice gap will only increase, so we think it is a key way of improving that issue of access to justice.

As has already been noted, it is vital that Legal Aid are resourced properly and, where we see increases in the scope of the work that they are called on to perform, like when a new magistrate gets appointed and they have to turn up to more matters, when we see an increase in matters being prosecuted or changes to areas of the law where Legal Aid are particularly involved, there is a commensurate reflection of that in the resources provided to them.

Having said that, and as I noted in the debate last week, we also need to be mindful of the role that community legal centres play, particularly the Women's Legal Centre, the Aboriginal Legal Service and Canberra Community Law. We see a certain interchangeability between the services provided by those community legal centres and the work done by Legal Aid. Often the client might not be quite eligible for one, but it gets sent to the other, or there is specialty. We need to see that context for all those services and the interrelationship that they have, and the commonality of client groups. We need to look at that whole picture when it comes to access to justice, which is what Legal Aid's primary role is about.

Overall, we will be supporting this line item in the budget.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Cultural Facilities Corporation—Part 1.15.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (6.03): I am excited to share today how this budget works to strengthen our cultural infrastructure, preserve our heritage and expand access to the arts for all Canberrans.

In particular, one of these assets is the Canberra Theatre Centre. I am pleased that this budget includes capital investment of more than \$1 million to support the Canberra Theatre Centre complex. This funding will enable the replacement of essential theatre equipment and upgrades to public areas. The additional investment will ensure continuity of service and safety for patrons and performers while we deliver on our election commitment to build a new Lyric Theatre as part of the complex.

In addition, from 1 July this year, the CFC assumed management of the much-loved, iconic Albert Hall. Integrating Albert Hall into the CFC portfolio reflects our commitment to enhancing its cultural and heritage value. The 2025-26 budget includes

around \$200,000 for a feasibility study to explore optimisation of Albert Hall's use. We are also investing in the conservation of the heritage-listed Mugga-Mugga Cottage, one of the few surviving buildings from Canberra's pre-Federation period.

Finally, we are delivering on two of ACT Labor's election commitments, to support Canberra Museum and Gallery's annual acquisitions and to establish a permanent exhibition space at Lanyon Homestead. The 2025-26 budget includes \$400,000 to expand CMAG's collection of artefacts and artworks that reflect the social and cultural history of the ACT. We will also bring more art and cultural exhibitions to the south of Canberra, in a location of historic significance, investing \$160,000 for a new exhibition space at Lanyon Homestead.

I commend these initiatives to the Assembly and look forward to seeing their impact in the years to come.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (6.06): I am pleased to speak to this line item because the Greens want a thriving live performance sector in Canberra. One of the barriers we hear from a lot of organisations is that there needs to be greater clarity around how the sector works together to provide opportunities for people to work on the smaller, more intimate performances, right up to those larger scale performances, and how they move through that whole chain of work throughout their career.

The sector is keen to see a performing arts strategy, and the Cultural Facilities Corporation could have a key role in that, having regard to our biggest theatre in the ACT—and, with the Lyric Theatre coming along, it will be even bigger. It is also our best-funded theatre in Canberra.

Through estimates, we heard from the Canberra Theatre Centre that they are working with CIT to provide placements for students completing live production qualifications. This is welcome news. CFC manages our biggest theatre and should be providing opportunities for students to develop their technical skills. The Greens would love to see partnerships like that across the arts sector for any organisations that are interested.

The CFC have an important role in supporting the local creative sector to thrive, but we do not currently have a clear understanding of exactly how different venues are integrated, how they are working together, how the different skills across performing arts can be shared across productions at all scales, and how government is helping to activate and promote that entire ecosystem and that scene to make sure that we are getting the most out of all of our different venues, so that our tourists are moving from one to the next, and our people, our performers and our artists know how this all fits together. We hope that this will be considered by the CFC when they are consulted by artsACT on the government's next arts, culture and creative policy.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (6.08): I would like to speak on a matter that is close to my heart and vital to the communities I represent—the equitable distribution of arts and cultural facilities and investment across the ACT and, in particular, the Murrumbidgee electorate.

The legislation governing the Cultural Facilities Corporation outlines its function clearly: “to manage, develop, present, coordinate and promote cultural activities at

designated locations and other places in the ACT”. That sounds promising; it sounds inclusive. It sounds like it should reach every corner of our territory, but it does not.

Further, the artsACT Statement of Ambition commits to creating amazing art and culture everywhere, at any time, for everyone. These are beautiful words, but words must be matched by action, and action must be felt by the people. Mr Speaker, how is the success of these policies and legislation assessed? I can tell you, from the ground up, that the people of Murrumbidgee do not feel like there is amazing art everywhere, or at any time, in their electorate.

A few years ago, I took it upon myself to bring art to Woden. I commissioned the Local Heroes wall on Melrose Drive. As a volunteer, I researched significant community members from our recent history and engaged a local artist to bring their stories to life. What was once a blank wall that was tagged badly is now a wall that has meaning. I also ran an exhibition called *Creative Woden* in Lovett Tower. For a month, we showcased the work of 15 local artists—artists who were thrilled to be able to participate in a local exhibition.

These initiatives were community driven, they were grassroots and they were done without the support of the very institutions that promised to promote culture everywhere in the ACT. I ask again: why is it so challenging for this government to include Murrumbidgee in its cultural vision? It feels like we are the blind spot that you do not see.

While the Cultural Facilities Corporation may not believe it is responsible for other parts of Canberra, it is part of the arts ecosystem in Canberra and is located at the heart of what will be five theatres in the city—the Courtyard Theatre, the Playhouse Theatre, Canberra Theatre, Lyric Theatre, and the Street Theatre by the ANU. And should I reel off all the arts centres in the inner north, too?

We are asked to use schools and what the private sector can provide. We are not asking for extravagance. We are asking for inclusion, for the same opportunities afforded to other parts of the ACT, and it is about time that people listened.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Office of the Work Health and Safety Commissioner—Part 1.16.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

ACT Executive—Part 1.17.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Icon Water Ltd—Part 1.18.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

ACT Gambling and Racing Commission—Part 1.19.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (6.11): This is an important area and one which, while I was minister, I had responsibility for, so I put that context on the table. Through that time, it became evident to me that there was a need for work to improve the role of the GRC. I was very pleased to be able to appoint a new chair of the board, who I think has brought an excellent set of fresh eyes to the role of the GRC.

It was interesting in the estimates process to have a discussion about the MOU that operates between the GRC and Access Canberra. Again, I have worked previously with many of the staff at Access Canberra and have a great deal of regard for both their skills and their commitment to the issues. There is certainly some room for improvement in understanding the specifics of the way Access Canberra works with the GRC.

It became evident, through the questions in the estimates process, that the MOU has been in place largely since the arrangement was set up. In that MOU there is \$5.9 million given from the GRC to Access Canberra every year, but there are no KPIs or clear outcomes related to that funding. This is an accountability issue and a transparency issue that can be improved so that there is more clarity on exactly what the GRC gets for that money that is being allocated.

Obviously, this is a contentious space around gambling harm minimisation and gambling regulation. There are certainly not major question marks at this point around what is happening in this space; but, for the future, with respect to seeing greater clarity as to how that money is spent, the ability of both the CEO of the GRC and the board of the GRC to have more oversight of how that money is spent would be a very important change.

That is certainly something that came through in the discussions in the estimates hearing. I would like to encourage the minister to continue to pursue that conversation. The conversation started towards the end of the last term. Of course, we saw some issues come up around the ability of the GRC to disclose information; I know that is on the minister's radar and I welcome that. Again, this work was underway in the last term, and I know the new minister is committed to following through on it.

There is definitely room here for a range of improvements, and I look forward to seeing those pursued over the coming period of the Assembly.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Public Trustee and Guardian—Part 1.20.

MR HANSON (Murrumbidgee) (6.14): Ms Stephen-Smith certainly wants to hear more about this. I know she is eager to hear it, and I have prepared a 20-minute speech so that she can get a full and comprehensive understanding of the pressures facing the Public Trustee and Guardian.

In all seriousness, the Public Trustee and Guardian is a very important institution. It does not rate a lot of attention. As many members would be aware, it provides estate management services, trustee services for community members and government entities, investment services, and management of funds held on trust. Their strategic priorities are outlined in the budget papers. It is another area of government, another

organisation, that is finding it tough to keep up. Ms Carrick raised that issue in estimates and asked:

How will you manage if, as it looks like, your appropriation does not even keep up with the status quo?

The response was:

That is an excellent pick-up ... We will talk to government about whether our underlying appropriation is appropriate and whether it allows us to be a sustainable operation going into the future.

It is yet another area of government that is under increased strain and difficulty. If we do not resource these entities that are not potentially high profile and do not get the same media attention as others, it can lead to some pretty bad consequences. We saw that with the Public Trustee when there were some significant issues a few years ago. I would like to thank them for all the hard work that they do and, if they do have those conversations with government, I hope that they get a good hearing.

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) (6.16): For the benefit of everyone who is here, I foreshadow that I will move that debate on the budget be adjourned after we have voted on the PTG. For the benefit of the particular staffer who said this morning that we would not finish the debate today, I would note that that is out of my hands. Despite the best efforts of government and, indeed, some others in this place, we will finish the debate tomorrow.

More importantly, with respect to the Public Trustee and Guardian, I welcome Mr Hanson's remarks and the interest that Ms Carrick showed through the estimates process. This is a part of government that does not attract an enormous amount of attention, because they are busy getting on with it, quite frankly.

I would note that, under the leadership of the new Public Trustee and Guardian, there is a lot of work underway to demystify what the PTG does and to make some things clearer, like the appropriation effectively being static for some time now, especially in the context that the PTG actually saves government money, in other areas of government money, across a range of different areas.

I cannot recall PTG being spoken about, at least at any length, in this place for some time, and I hope to change that. I hope to change, as the responsible minister, the Attorney-General's overall involvement with the organisation. They are part of government, and they do quite a phenomenal job. I have been on a journey in learning the exact extent of the work that they do.

I would particularly note again those efforts not just to demystify but also to bring the Public Trustee and Guardian to the people. That has worked incredibly effectively over the last little while, which I will note shortly.

While we have spent quite a bit of time on Legal Aid, the DPP and other community legal centres, I would note that the budget debate is ordered in appropriation lines from

largest to smallest, and that is why the PTG is quite close to the end. It does reflect that their overall funding is modest, and what they are able to achieve with that funding is pretty extraordinary.

I hope that, with Mr Hanson's contribution in his speech today, and the interest shown by Ms Carrick and other members during the budget process, we restart some scrutiny over the role that the PTG has, that we properly ensure that it is getting the recognition that it deserves, and particularly the hard work of the staff.

I would note that, by acting as guardian to vulnerable people, the PTG provide high-quality decision-making support. In doing so, they significantly reduce the cost to other services in the community, such as Legal Aid and the ACT Courts and Tribunal. That is because they are able to build a relationship with a client and to explain some things where there might not otherwise be enough time to do so, talk their clients through some processes and, again, demystify what occurs in the legal realm.

An aged-care decision coordinator role has been established recently. It is about supporting timely and informed decision-making for clients requiring residential aged care. This role has been created so that a strong relationship with Canberra Health Services can be developed and, ultimately, to allow them to free up hospital beds for the Canberra community, while making sure that clients of the guardian are actively supported through that transition to residential aged care.

Effectively, it is so that, if it is more appropriate for someone who might be in a hospital bed to be in residential aged care, but they might need a bit of extra support to help with that process, the PTG is there. Again, ultimately, that means those beds are then available for those who perhaps need them more, or in more appropriate circumstances.

The PTG has done an incredible job with Wills Week recently, Mr Speaker. It is a reminder to everyone to get a will, if you do not already have one. If you are not sure where to start, there is the PTG's Safewill link. There were 77 new wills created in just one week through their advocacy during Wills Week, which is a terrific outcome. We want to see more of it, and we will be promoting that extensively.

Finally, the PTG is also in a unique position in relation to trusts. Unlike private trustees, the PTG offers continuity, impartiality and institutional stability. It is accountable through quarterly audit and risk committee reviews, annual audits by the ACT Auditor-General, and appearances at hearings in the Legislative Assembly, where scrutiny is further afforded to it. Investment decisions are set by the Public Trustee and Guardian Investment Board, and staff are uniquely trained to engage with beneficiaries with compassion and empathy.

In the short time I have given myself, I think that starts to paint a real picture of the extraordinary value that the PTG provides to our community. I look forward to engaging with staff more and speaking about them more in this place. I certainly welcome further scrutiny of their appropriation, and especially against the extraordinary services that they offer and the savings that they otherwise provide to government. I commend this part of the appropriation to the chamber.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

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

Waste—single-use plastics—standing order 118AA

MR SPEAKER: I want to refer back to a standing order 118AA point of order raised by Ms Clay earlier, regarding a question to Ms Orr. The specific question was: “Will you consider banning soy sauce fish containers?” On reviewing the *Hansard*, it is clear that Ms Orr adequately answered the question. There is no need for any further action from the minister on that one.

Statements by members

Ms Leandra Peiris—departure

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (6.25): This is a speech that I certainly was not going to get a person who would normally write my speeches to write, because I would not know exactly what she was going to say. That is Leandra, who is sitting up there in the back of the chamber. This speech is to recognise the contribution that she has made to my office. Sadly for us, but good for her, she is leaving our office to greener pastures sometime in the next couple of weeks—

Mr Hanson: To the Greens?

MR MILLIGAN: Not to the Greens. Leandra has worked in my office for a couple of years now, and she is turned into someone that is quite capable and will tackle any issue head on. Her level of professionalism and her skill set has improved out of sight.

Leandra started off in the electorate as my electorate adviser. She is now acting as our senior adviser, and she has come in and turned that office upside down. She has created new operating systems. She is decided on how the office is to operate and manage. Honestly, I am not sure how Harry, Josh and I are going to cope without her. I am not too sure if we are going to keep up to those standards, but we will certainly give it the best chance.

Mr Greg Francis—tribute

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (6.27): I want to speak about—and with his permission—someone that has signed up. I know he is known to both Ms Cheyne and I. That is Greg Francis, up in Shakespeare Crescent in Fraser. As my fellow Ginninderra member will know, Mr Francis has been basically maintaining a government landscaped area next to his home, adjacent to the bus terminal at the top of Fraser. He has reached a frustration point. He is 80 years old and he has been poisoning weeds and, with some difficulty, trying to keep alive the natives that have been planted.

I responded to his call. I first visited Greg in 2023 and did some ministerial writing, and we saw some improvement. But I visited there on Monday, and I can see why our Fraser resident is so frustrated. Again, this is a deliberately created landscaped area adjacent to his home, next to the interchange up there at the top of Fraser, and he is looking after it. So I do make an appeal to the Minister for City Services and the Ginninderra member to provide some assistance and get that area looked after.

Discussion concluded.

Adjournment

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Environment—light pollution

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (6.28): I want to speak in support of a petition to the Australian House of Representatives on light pollution regulation and dark sky preservation. Light pollution caused by excessive artificial light at night has harmful effects on human health, is harmful and disruptive to vulnerable species of flora and fauna and has negative impacts on the economy, including placing unnecessary loads on electrical infrastructure, which leads to increases in greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Reducing artificial light at night not only helps to reduce the harmful effects I have listed but can also lead to benefits, such as making the streets safer by reducing glare and light trespass. It may also lead to an increase in astrotourism.

The petition gathered 12,944 signatures indicating a strong community interest in addressing light pollution. Chief petitioner, ANU Indigenous Researcher Associate, Peter Swanton, who is writing his PhD on dark sky preservation, said this about Canberra:

We are seeing at the moment anywhere from a 5 to a 10 per cent increase in light pollution each year.

The petition calls on the Australian parliament introduced legislation to limit light pollution and artificial light at night, including public and private exterior illumination, ensuring that lighting is only used when and where it is necessary and is limited to levels which are safe and fit for purpose. Countries such as France, Germany and Croatia have already successfully introduced such legislation which limits light pollution and artificial light at night.

While some of the levers are in the commonwealth parliament's control, including over the Mount Stromlo Observatory and the National Light Pollution Guidelines for Wildlife, many levers are also in the ACT government's control—under the planning system and also the regulation system, which controls lighting, planning and approval. City Services, with its street lighting network, is a significant contributor to light pollution across the ACT.

I have spoken regularly in this chamber about preserving our night skies, and would like to draw members attention to my motion from 27 June 2023, which made a number of very detailed calls to improve lighting here in the ACT. As Australasian Dark Sky Alliance Director, Marnie Ogg, said:

Light is the fastest growing pollutant in the world and there's a wealth of scientific evidence about the harmful impacts of excessive artificial light at night. But the

good news is light is also the easiest pollution problem to solve.

Ms Leandra Peiris—departure

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (6.31): Welcome to part two of the farewell to Ms Peiris, who is at the back room. Maybe I should have done this during the adjournment, instead of the 90 second speeches. But I was not responsible for writing this speech and so I am not at all organised.

Leandra has been dedicated to this role. Her ability to also create interesting and numerous contests for my social media was certainly a big win for us last year, and I contribute that to her amazing work. I cannot confirm or deny if Leandra was the person behind the big head—literally, in that sense. Who knows? Maybe something might come out in the near future. This is also a testament to Leandra’s commitment to this job. She started walking out of this chamber a moment ago, thinking that that was it, and I said, “No, come back; there is part two to come,” and she said, “No, I can’t; I have too much work to do. Leave me alone.” That is, once again, another testament to her commitment to this job.

But, in all seriousness, I know that, whatever Leandra will put her mind to, she will succeed. She is the most dedicated, intelligent young lady that I do know. And who knows; she might return to this place sometime in the near future and/or maybe the place up on the hill, behind us—maybe not as an adviser but maybe as a member of parliament. I think that she would be very well suited to that role in particular.

In conclusion, thank you, Leandra, for everything that you have done for me over the last couple of years. It certainly has been a pleasure. I would like to wish you all the best into the future.

University of Canberra—Open Day Fest

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (6.33): I rise today to speak about my recent visit on the weekend to the University of Canberra’s Open Day Fest. It was truly fantastic. As an alumni, it is a special place to visit for me as well. It was where I did my law degree over 20 years ago now. It was a fantastic event and a wonderful showcase of what the University of Canberra has to offer. I particularly enjoyed walking around the many stalls that provided information on UC’s facilities, its student associations and the wide range of courses available. There was plenty of entertainment on site as well.

For prospective students, it was an invaluable opportunity to discover UC life and learn more about the pathways open. It was a vibrant community celebration, complete with free donuts, entertainment and plenty of activities for families as well. The atmosphere was really very lively and alive. There was a great vibe there. The numbers in attendance were over 4,500 over that day.

It was not a planned meet-up, but, as I walked into the University of Canberra Open Day, beneath this huge arc, Vice Chancellor the Hon. Bill Shorten, was there and it was great to have a chat to him and congratulate him on what looked to be a wonderful festival that unrolled that day. A highlight of the day was the outstanding line-up of live entertainment, with the headline performance from Jack River.

The UC Open Day Fest was also an important reminder of the vibrant student life that thrives at the university, right in the heart of the electorate of Ginninderra. The UC is a major contributor to the social and economic life of Belconnen and to the wider Canberra community. Thousands of students live, work and volunteer locally, supporting small businesses, energising our cafes and shops and contributing to community organisations and sporting clubs.

I want to commend the University of Canberra for hosting such a well-organised and fun-filled, informative event. I certainly encourage anyone to partake in future UC events and open days.

In closing, I want to give a special shoutout to Oscar's. When I was there on the open day I had a snack at Oscar's—I actually paid for my food that day, just for the record—and I ended up leaving not knowing where, at the end of the day, I was missing my scarf, a very loved scarf of mine. After a few inquiries as to where I had travelled, Oscar's had found my scarf—and they had even cleaned it for me. So a big shoutout to Oscar's and the University of Canberra as well.

Ms Erin Dinneen—departure

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (6.36): Continuing on the theme of farewells, along with my fellow social policy committee members, who will also be speaking this evening, I wanted to take this opportunity to thank Erin Dinneen for her time as a social policy committee assistant secretary and for all her work in the committee secretariat.

The work of the committee secretariat often goes unnoticed, but their work is vital in keeping this place running—from annual reports, estimates, committee inquiries and hearings and keeping us non-executive members who are on committees in line. So we did not want to let this opportunity pass without thanking Erin for being part of this and for all the work that she has done in her time here. So, through you, Mr Speaker, thank you, Erin. The social policy committee started as a large committee of five, and we are now an evenly numbered four—most of us being new members this term. Your guidance and support has been really helpful.

I know Katie, our committee secretary, values you and will miss you just as much, if not more, than those of us on the committee. So, without giving away any committee business, thank you, Erin, for all your work as part of the committee secretariat—for guiding us, putting up with our odd requests, researching our many ideas, following up with stakeholders, making sense of what we are trying to achieve and keeping us all in line following the standing orders. We wish you all the best as you leave us here and go do amazing things. Best of luck with everything. We hope to see you around here again in the future, even if we have to find a way of holding an inquiry that you could appear at as a witness—in a positive way of course. I also thank you for hanging around this evening to be here in the chamber with us while we farewell you.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (6.38): I also rise today in appreciation of Erin, who has been a brilliant assistant secretary here on the social policy committee. We are incredibly sad that she is leaving us and are already coping by devising elaborate plans to get her back in the building, by popular demand. We cannot of course share these

plans, because they are, in fact, committee in confidence.

I reckon that the secretariat is both one of the coolest and the most challenging roles of this place—and I want to be just like them when I grow up. Not only do you need the skills to triage large volumes of information and dig through *Hansard*, immediately, assumingly, become a subject matter expert and write reports like a boss; you also need to maintain absolute impartiality to committee members all across the political spectrum with vastly different methods of working. You also occasionally have to herd us like cats. Erin does all of this with great aplomb.

One of my favourite things about Erin is that she never makes me—or, in fact, anyone I think—feel stupid for probably the objectively little bit stupid things I say. She seems to have this unnerving ability to read minds. There have been many times where I have handed her a bit of a word salad and she has come back with more of a chef-hatted masterpiece. Contributions that I have made to committee business have been genuinely vastly improved by Erin’s diplomatic hand, and I am really grateful to her for that.

She will be an incredible addition to her new team. I know her contributions to the social policy landscape in Canberra will make a resounding difference for the better.

MR SPEAKER: I would just like to add from the chair that Erin also worked with chamber support and education here in her time at OLA.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (6.39): I too will be speaking on Erin’s departure. I am still in denial that there will be a departure of Erin. So I will be scheming to prevent that from happening. I hope you fail miserably in your next endeavour and are forced to return to the assist social policy committee, because we are completely dependent on you and Katie for the work that you do—and have been since the social policy committee hearings started this term.

As a new member chairing the committee there was a lot that I needed to do to pretend that I knew how to run committee sessions, and from the beginning, was incredibly thankful for the support that Erin provides. I think Miss Nuttall and Ms Tough reflected how she does that in a compassionate, careful, prompt, considered and intelligent way.

Erin, you will be such an asset to the next organisation that you are working for, and I am looking forward to engaging with you in that way as well. I want to extend a massive thank you for all of your efforts—and for always coming equipped with a pen for when I need to sign things and do not have one of my own. Thank you, Erin. We are really going to miss you in this place.

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (6.40): In the interest of everyone, I will keep my speech really short. I want to echo everything that has been said by my fellow committee members about Erin, and to especially say thank you to you for all of your diplomatic ways of saying, “Well, that is not right, but let’s work through it.” As I think most of us are new members of this Assembly, as Mr Emerson and Ms Tough indicated, your strong hand in guiding us through what we need to do is appreciated. I also want to say that I am sorry for all of the times you heard me complain about how tired I am. I am sure you will not be looking forward to coming and listening to that.

I sincerely hope that your next role is everything you imagined it to be. You are going to do great things, and we will be watching to see how that plays out. But I also echo my fellow committee members' calls about you perhaps not leaving—as we are trying to devise ways where we can get you to stay, because we value you so much and we hope that you can remain with us and continue to provide that steady hand to us.

Thank you very much for all you have done. We really appreciate you. Thank you for staying so late. Well done!

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) (6.42): If there is one perk for being MGB, it is the last word and also making everyone stay a bit later. That is my revenge. But, seriously, on behalf of the government—or, on behalf of the executive, more accurately—I wish to add my voice in wishing Erin all the very best—and also adding that I am very happy to be on a unity ticket with Mr Emerson. That is a little bit unusual for me, but I am happy to be your co-conspirator anytime in seeing how I can ensure that Erin stays. Erin, it is apparent to everyone that any organisation that you work for is going to be extraordinarily lucky to have you. But please note that you are also welcome back—in anyone's office, it appears—anytime, including in this parliament.

We often reflect in valedictory speeches that the Office of the Legislative Assembly works so hard to make us look functional. Anything that seems to go smoothly in this place or to work pretty effectively is usually because someone has told us how to do it or otherwise guided us or supported us. I think it speaks volumes that, in just a year, you have left such an impression with some of the newest members in this place. It really speaks to the tutelage that you have provided but also how, somehow, you have made committee processes enjoyable. This is of great surprise to me, because I think there is a point where we really do find them tedious—and some of us come to that conclusion early. The fact that there is such widely held commentary in this place and genuine fondness for you, as someone who has been impartial but also supported new members in this place to be effective committee members is, I think, pretty special—and I think it is very obvious why it has been acknowledged with such power today.

Everyone else promised to give 90 seconds and did, and now I have definitely broken that. But, in saying that OLA and all of its officers do an extraordinary job in making us look good, I think Erin certainly exemplifies that. I think you can be very proud of the impression that you have left and the legacy that you have created, particularly in ensuring that we have some very effective—perhaps too effective—new committee members. Thank you very much and hopefully we will see you around.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.46 pm.