



DEBATES
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

DAILY HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Tuesday, 21 October 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 **Friday, 7 November 2025**

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

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

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.

Petitions

The following petitions were lodged for presentation:

Scullin—play space upgrades—petitions 45-25 and 67-25

By Mr Cain, from 151 and 29 residents, respectively:

Mr Cain, from 151 and 29 residents, requesting that the Assembly call on the ACT Government to, after consultation with the community, fund and deliver upgrades to the Duigan Street Park and Playground (e-Pet 045-25 and Pet 067-25).

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

Motion to take note of petitions

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

That the petitions so lodged be noted.

Scullin—play space upgrades—petitions 45-25 and 67-25

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (10.02): The petition I bring to the attention of the Assembly this morning is aimed to address the needs to upgrade a local park in Scullin: the Duigan Street park and playground. I lodged the e-petition with 151 signatures and I also have 29 signatures on paper. This petition draws attention to the local community's desire to have upgraded and playable spaces with more options for the community, particularly for those with mobility needs and families.

I thank the principal petitioner, Ms Emily Johnson, for bringing forward this petition to provide members in our community with an updated, inclusive and safe playground and play area. Unsurprisingly, Ms Johnson lives very close to the park. I am delighted to sponsor the petition and call on the government to look into upgrades for this local park.

Relatively inexpensive changes would enhance and lift up this park to a standard where it would be much more available to the community and would be used by more of the community. The playground located at 22 Mackinolty Street in Scullin is a valued green space as well for families and residents of all ages.

The current facilities are a bit outdated and no longer adequately meet the needs of the community, particularly in relation to safety, accessibility and inclusivity, in alignment with modern play standards. Improvements sought include replacement of ageing equipment, installation of soft-fall rubber surfacing, fencing around the play space, upgrades to accessible paths for those who experience mobility challenges, shade structures over key play areas, and additional seating and community tables. The petition reflects the community's desire to ensure that the Duigan Street park and play area remain safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces, with more options available to more of our community.

I look forward to the minister's response and to the serious consideration, at relatively small expense, to provide more valuable options for our community at that park.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Chief Minister—progress to date

Ministerial statement

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (10.04): Hard as it is to believe, it has been a year since the territory election of 2024. In this first year of the 11th Legislative Assembly, the government has been focused on the first stage of delivery of what we promised at that election to be delivered in this four-year term. We are building for Canberra's future by delivering new investments in public health care, education and housing and new and renewed infrastructure across the territory. Also, further progress has been made on the development of our city centre, Civic. This is a significant transformation for the city centre. We are delivering this through a range of transformative projects that, together, will revitalise the way Canberrans experience and enjoy our city centre.

The extension of light rail to Commonwealth Park will provide a reliable and sustainable transport link from the north to the central lakefront. This project represents a major step in our commitment to expand the city's mass transit network and make public transport readily available for more Canberrans. The raising of London Circuit has been an important step in bringing the city and the lake closer together. By reconnecting Civic to Lake Burley Griffin, we are bridging a longstanding physical divide between the CBD and the lake. This work will enable new commercial, cultural and residential developments to take place in the heart of the CBD and will improve accessibility between Civic, the lakefront and key destinations like Acton. As this project progresses, we will see a lakeside precinct that provides more housing and more community and commercial space in a really iconic location of our capital.

Pleasingly, following the National Capital Authority's works approval, stage 1 of the new University of New South Wales Canberra City campus is now underway. This is a significant investment in our city's higher education future and cements Canberra's position as Australia's knowledge capital. We were very pleased yesterday to break

ground on the project, formally commencing the delivery of stage 1 of the transformative new campus on the Parkes side of Constitution Avenue. The campus will offer modern facilities and student services, as well as retail, and will connect education, industry, government and the community, with a focus on education offerings, including cybersecurity, defence, artificial intelligence, climate and public policy.

This project is expected to create 350 jobs through the construction phase. Once complete, the campus will be home to over 6,000 students and educators. This will certainly support activity in our CBD. It will support local businesses, generate new local jobs and provide a boost during construction to the building sector. The influx of new people and ideas in this precinct will stimulate innovation and support local businesses. It is a strategic investment that we have supported for the territory's future and for the next generation of Canberrans who can be educated at this campus.

Just across Parkes Way, the new Canberra aquatic centre will deliver modern facilities for swimming in partnership with the Commonwealth government as part of a rejuvenated Commonwealth Park, with a light rail stop at the doorstep. It is more than that. The facility will anchor the development of a future Convention and Entertainment Precinct. It will help Canberra to attract more events, conferences and performances that support our visitor economy. These facilities, together with the new lyric theatre, which is also a significant development for the cultural life of our city, will help attract more high-quality performances, support local talent and strengthen Canberra's reputation as a cultural destination.

This work in totality reflects a simple but meaningful concept: cities must evolve to meet the needs of their people. Canberra's population has grown by nearly 50 per cent over the duration of this decade. We are now approaching half a million residents, and we are projected to continue that growth. In planning for that growth, we must ensure the city remains inclusive, sustainable and does not compromise on the values and lifestyle that make Canberra so special.

That is why the transformation of the city centre is not happening in isolation. It comes with the delivery of improvements and increased service delivery right across the territory—across suburban Canberra and in each of our city's regions. In health care in particular, we are delivering new health centres, expanding hospital capacities and hiring more nurses, doctors, allied health professionals and specialists, just as we promised we would. In education we are delivering new and expanded schools in growth areas, such as the Molonglo Valley and Gungahlin. We are delivering on our plans for each region of Canberra. That includes—and this is topical this morning—building and upgrading parks and playgrounds, improving community centres and investing in safer roads.

We are also focused on practical and proven efforts to reduce the territory's emissions by taking definitive action to protect and support future generations. The government is continuing to also play our part in nationwide efforts to increase the supply of housing. This includes investing in new public, community and affordable housing and progressing planning reforms that have a clear focus on increasing housing supply and improving accessibility.

It is an ambitious plan for Canberra's future. It is one that we intend to continue to deliver progressively over this four-year term. It reflects the commitment to inclusion, fairness and sustainability. It is a plan that meets the needs of a growing and increasingly diverse Canberra population. It is a plan that we are getting on with the job of delivering.

I present the following paper:

Progress in the first year of the 11th Assembly—Ministerial statement, 21 October 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.12): A year ago today, Canberrans placed their trust in Labor's long-term vision for our city. We are witnessing an ambitious undertaking to transform our city centre with projects such as the extension of light rail to Commonwealth Park, the raising of London Circuit, the construction of a new lyric theatre, the development of Acton Waterfront, the new University of New South Wales Canberra City campus, the Canberra aquatic centre, and the Convention and Entertainment Precinct.

These are commendable initiatives. However, while the city centre sees significant government investment, many of our town centres and suburbs are being left behind. In Woden, sports and recreation facilities continue to disappear. In addition to the loss of the indoor sports stadium, the proposed demolition of the Phillip pool and relocation of the ice rink are deeply concerning. Labor has promised a new Woden community centre at each of the last three elections, yet residents are still waiting. The government is leaving the provision of community facilities to the private sector. From two 50-metre pools, we are moving to a 25-metre pool amongst five Geocon towers. There is the Westfield master plan with proposed residential towers of up to 55 storeys high. Will a deal be done between height in Woden town centre and the provision of community facilities by the private sector?

Molonglo residents remain without a town centre, college, adequate community facilities or a police station, despite growing concerns about crime. Traffic delays on arterial roads persist. An investment in active travel infrastructure across Canberra's south is minimal. A safe and dedicated off-road cycleway between the city and Woden remains a distant hope, off in the never-never. There are missing links in Coombs, Mawson, Weston and other areas.

It is vital that we balance investment between the city centre, town centres and suburbs. Every Canberran deserves access to quality facilities, safe transport options and a vibrant community space, regardless of where they live. This Assembly must ensure that our city's transformation is inclusive and reflects not only our aspirations for a world-class capital but also our commitment to equity, accessibility and community wellbeing. People in our suburbs need things to do and places to meet. They pay their rates and deserve a fair go when it comes to investment in social infrastructure. How is the lack of investment in our social needs in the suburbs progressive? What is a good

outcome? How does this city-centric policy include all of us?

Question resolved in the affirmative.

National Carers Week

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 pleased to bring National Carers Week 2025 to the attention of the Assembly. I have the privilege of speaking today about carers' vital contribution to our community and how this government is supporting the important work they do. The day-to-day activities of a carer tend to happen quietly behind the scenes but make an enormous difference to the life of the person they care for.

In Canberra, there are an estimated 58,000 carers who care for people who need help with the tasks of daily living. National Carers Week is an opportunity for us to affirm and acknowledge the deep generosity and commitment that underpins the caring role. The ACT government continues to drive efforts to ensure Canberra is an inclusive city that supports carers. We know carers' health, wellbeing, financial security and participation in work or study can be affected by the demands of caring. This means carers need improved supports to help them sustain what they do as a carer and access opportunities to support their goals. The ACT Carers Strategy continues to guide improvements in how we support and acknowledge carers. This reflects the two-fold vision of the Carers Strategy: a community that cares for carers and the people they care for, and supporting carers is investing in Canberra's future.

Our key community partner in this shared work is Carers ACT. I acknowledge Carers ACT's strong commitment to advocacy and support which ensures carers voices are heard and considered. I also refer to the government's work, led by Minister Pettersson, to support foster and kinship carers. The government celebrates and acknowledges the critical contributions of foster and kinship carers, who provide safe and stable homes for children and young people.

Last month, during Foster and Kinship Care Week, the Child, Youth and Families Division hosted a Carer Appreciation Lunch to celebrate and acknowledge the incredible contribution of kinship and foster carers across the ACT. The event brought together carers, support staff and community partners, and offered an opportunity to connect, reflect and recognise the vital role carers play in the lives of children and young people. It was a heartfelt celebration of care, commitment and community, honouring those who open their hearts and their homes to provide safety, stability and love.

In August 2025, the Child, Youth and Families kinship service, in collaboration with partner agencies, proudly hosted a community event in celebration of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day. Themed "Little Footsteps, Big Future", the event honoured the strength, culture and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Families, carers and community members came together to celebrate through cultural activities, storytelling and connection to country. The day reflected the government's ongoing commitment to culturally-safe practice and

supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and carers in meaningful and community-led ways

Hosting community events and developing resources such as the Kinship and Foster Carers Resource Hub aims to better support carers. These are tangible ways we deliver on our commitments through the Carers Strategy and the ACT's Carers Recognition Act. Unlike many other jurisdictions, the ACT includes foster and kinship carers in these guiding frameworks, acknowledging them as part of the broader carer community. This positions the ACT as a leader in inclusive practice concerning carers.

The ACT government continues to engage with and promote the Carers Recognition Act. This year, the government renewed its focus on this important legislation by updating website information and developing guidance material for directorates and non-government agencies that provide carer support. The new material provides greater clarity around the care relationship principles to guide agencies on how to raise awareness, consult with carers on changes to carer support programs, and report on how they are upholding the principles.

The government understands that many carers are also significantly affected by ongoing national reform in the disability services and aged-care environment. The ACT government Disability Reform Taskforce has therefore engaged with Carers ACT to ensure the government considers carers' experiences and needs in the context of these reforms. This is critical work which acknowledges that reform may cause additional stress and uncertainty for carers.

The ACT government remains committed to supporting carers through change and reform, including the introduction of ACT legislation for voluntary assisted dying, which is set to commence on 3 November 2025. To help carers understand the new law and how it affects their role, the ACT government engaged with carers and advocates in a series of forums throughout 2025. These included forums for disability and aged care led by the Health and Community Services Directorate, a Carers ACT forum, a multicultural forum, a Health Care Consumers' Association members forum, and a Palliative Care ACT session.

Additionally, the Voluntary Assisted Dying Community and Consumer Consultation Group was co-chaired by the Health Care Consumers' Association and included Carers ACT to represent the views of carers, as well as a range of groups, including disability advocates. This consultation group had an active role in reviewing documents and other material that will be used in voluntary assisted dying practitioner training and for the process itself, to ensure they are fit for purpose and easily understood by those who need them most. This engagement with carers and carer representatives acknowledged the likely impact of voluntary assisted dying on carers, ensuring their unique perspectives were considered as implementation of the legislation was progressed.

Carers ACT continues to be a strong representative voice for carers and works with the ACT government to deliver progress in line with the priorities established under the Carers Strategy. A key part of this work is supporting carer-led governance of the strategy. In March this year, Carers ACT hosted an event for carers who were involved in the strategy's development or contributed to consultation and advocacy activities. This provided an opportunity for many carers to come together and share their views

about future priorities for the remaining years of the Carers Strategy. Carers ACT also leads regular Carer Collective sessions to consult with carers on specific topics, ensuring their voices are reflected in policy and practice approaches that affect them. Since its inception, the Carers Strategy has helped to shape a strong focus on carer recognition. In line with this, Carers ACT delivers local carer recognition activities each year. During the last reporting period, Carers ACT hosted a cocktail party at an elegant local venue, bringing together carers, supporters and stakeholders. We know many carers have limited opportunities to attend special outings, so this type of event is designed to celebrate them and acknowledge the important work that they do each day.

Looking forward, there is more we can do to support and affirm carers. The ACT government will continue to progress work around several commitments for carers over coming months. This includes exploring the feasibility of a carers recognition card to help carers more easily self-identify and access support. Carers continue to be a priority for this government.

We acknowledge the critical contribution carers make to the life of our city and continue to progress efforts under the Carers Strategy to strengthen recognition and awareness of the caring role. On behalf of the community, I thank carers for the way they show up every day and do such important work. Also, I extend our thanks to Carers ACT for their expertise and involvement in our shared efforts around the Carers Strategy and carer policy more generally.

I present the following paper:

National Carers Week—Ministerial statement, 21 October 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Public schools—system resourcing review

Ministerial statement

MS BERRY (Ginninderra—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (10.22): Today I rise to provide the Assembly with information about the ACT's public school system resourcing review. I acknowledge the significant amount of work that is happening in our public schools and across the public school system. Also, I thank principals and all of our school based and directorate staff for their hard work, commitment and professionalism. I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all of our public school system stakeholders, especially the AEU, for their advocacy on this important issue.

Last week, I appointed an expert panel to provide me with independent advice on the ACT's public school system resourcing. The five-member panel has extensive expertise in education system leadership, economic analysis, equity, advocacy and public sector operations. The expert panel is chaired by Professor Ken Smith AO and comprises

diverse Australian education experts, including Julie Sonnemann, Associate Professor Anna Hogan, Hayley McQuire and Dr Bill Maiden PSM OAM.

I met with the expert panel on Monday to share my expectations for their work. They will be in Canberra to begin meeting with schools and stakeholders in the coming weeks. The expert panel will provide the government with recommendations about how to effectively and efficiently use the funding for public education in the ACT. This includes defining the core service offering that schools can deliver equitably, sustainably and in line with regulations and policy. It includes exploring the best model of central support services for schools and the right balance of responsibilities between schools and the central office in our unique jurisdiction, and it includes detailed analysis of the current resourcing model.

Their work will build on the important work of Professor Barney Dalgarno and the Literacy and Numeracy Education Expert Panel, which recommended a shift to an evidenced, informed and consistent approach to education across ACT public schools. A key question for the review will be how our resourcing and operating model needs to change as we shift our approach in ACT public education from what has been an autonomous model to a shared system-wide approach.

The voices of stakeholders are critical to informing the expert panel's advice and recommendations. The expert panel will consult with stakeholder advisory groups comprising representatives from the Australian Education Union ACT Branch, the CPSU, ACT Parents, the ACT Principals Association, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, the ACT School Business Managers Association and other ACT government directorates. The expert panel will report back to me by 2 April 2026. This timeframe enables the expert panel to consult with stakeholders, including schools, throughout term 4 2025 and term 1 of 2026. Their recommendations will then support planning and budgeting for the 2027 school year and beyond.

This year, ACT public schools have experienced challenges in operating within their budget allocations. This review is an opportunity to consider these challenges at a system level and propose sustainable solutions for the long term. We know that schools are spending more money on supporting students, particularly those with increasingly complex needs. This is not a surprise. However, we need to ensure that the way we manage this is sustainable and that the supports are available across all our schools. As Minister for Education and Early Childhood, my focus is on delivering a public education system that fosters both excellence and equity. This is an exciting and important opportunity for nation-leading work in our public school system.

I know how hard our education staff work to deliver the best outcomes for children and families, and I know how much our community values our public education system. This review will help us all to continue strengthening the system so that it continues to work both in the immediate future and in longer term.

This is not the last time I will be addressing the Assembly about the ACT public school system resourcing review. I will table the expert panel's report in the Legislative Assembly by May 2026. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I look forward to updating the Assembly on the expert panel's important work.

I present the following paper:

ACT public school system resourcing review—Ministerial statement, 21 October 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Australian Early Development Census—results Ministerial statement

MS BERRY (Ginninderra—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood, Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (10.27): Today I rise to provide the Assembly with information about the ACT's Australian Early Development Census, AEDC, results. Children's early years are critical in shaping their lifelong health, learning and wellbeing. As Minister for Education and Early Childhood, I am committed to ensuring that every child in Canberra has the best possible start in life.

The Australian Early Development Census, or AEDC, is a population data measure of early childhood development. It is collected every three years and is a vital tool for identifying developmental trends and informing early intervention strategies. In 2024, all ACT schools and 97.1 per cent of children across all education sectors participated in the AEDC. I want to thank teachers and schools for their involvement.

The most recent 2024 AEDC results, released nationally on 13 June 2025, show a concerning national trend. A higher proportion of Australian children are starting school developmentally vulnerable. In the ACT, 28.1 per cent of children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains—above the national average of 23.5 per cent; 14.9 per cent of ACT children are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, compared to 12.9 per cent nationally; and, unfortunately, less than half, at 44.6 per cent, of ACT children are developmentally on track on all five domains.

AEDC results are particularly concerning for First Nations children, and there is a demonstrated disproportionate vulnerability for this cohort. Only 24.1 per cent of First Nations children are developmentally on track on all five domains. Additionally, 47.4 per cent of First Nations children were evaluated as requiring further assessment, compared to 23 per cent of all children. It is a target under Closing the Gap to increase the proportion of First Nations children assessed as developmentally on track on all five domains of the AEDC, and we must take action to turn these trends around.

While these results are concerning, there are some encouraging signs. The ACT continues to report a lower percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in the language and cognitive skills domain compared to the national average, and we have seen a significant improvement in the social competence domain. The factors influencing these results are not yet fully understood; however, beyond the AEDC process, I am hearing from early childhood education and care services, preschools and

schools in the ACT that children's behavioural and developmental needs are becoming more complex.

In the ACT, AEDC data is shared with educators, health professionals and services across the government and community sector to coordinate responses and provide tailored support for children. The data is used to guide policy development, resource allocation and planning to support children's wellbeing and learning outcomes. Together with other ministers, the ACT government has led a concerted effort to optimise early childhood outcomes over recent years, including the development of a suite of strategies and action plans and significant investment that support children's health, development, wellbeing, and education.

In response to the 2021 AEDC findings, the Health and Community Services Directorate piloted a three-year-old development check this year in early childhood education and care services and Koori preschools. The pilot is particularly relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and aims to identify children's developmental needs early and, where risks or delays are identified, connect children and families with relevant supports and services. The Health and Community Services Directorate has also expanded the Child Development Service for children aged 24 months to 36 months, with a \$7.2 million investment to improve access to free speech therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and autism assessments.

During almost five years of implementing our nation-leading early childhood education strategy, Set up for Success, I have been able to implement a number of initiatives in recent years to support children, families, early childhood education and care settings and preschools. These initiatives include providing universal access to quality early learning for three-year-old children through the three-year-old preschool program and targeted three-year-old initiative; undertaking a co-design process with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community on the evolution of Koori Pre to ensure that it meets the needs of the community now and into the future and also expanding the program by an additional 66 places in 2024; delivering a range of workforce initiatives to enhance the skills and qualifications of educators, including professional learning in trauma-informed practice, play-based learning and inclusive educational practices; developing supports for families in recognition that parents are their child's first teacher and play a vital role in shaping children's development; and providing substantial coaching supports for early childhood settings and preschools to support children with a disability or developmental delay or who may be experiencing disadvantage and or vulnerability.

In July 2026, the Australian government will launch the Thriving Kids Program, which aims to leverage existing systems to support children aged birth to eight years with mild to moderate developmental concerns and autism. This program is a collaboration between the Australian government and state and territory governments and will enhance local efforts to respond to the AEDC findings.

While the ACT government is making significant efforts to respond to the AEDC results, we must do more to ensure that every child has the best possible start in life. The AEDC results are a call to action for the ACT. They highlight a clear need for improvement in how we identify developmental needs early, respond effectively and support children's development in the critical early years. They also highlight a need to

deliver targeted initiatives to address the disproportionate vulnerability among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

I take this data and the declining results very seriously. The ACT government will undertake an analysis of the AEDC results to further understand the declining results. Understanding the drivers will ensure our future efforts and investments are evidence-based, targeted and effective. The 2024 AEDC results highlight the critical importance of early years investment in helping every child in Canberra to thrive. I look forward to updating the Assembly on this important work.

I present the following paper:

Australian Early Development Census results—Ministerial statement, 21 October 2025.

I move:

That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (10.35): I thank the minister for her statement on this important issue today. This data shows that, when it comes to early childhood development, the existing response is falling short.

The ACT remains the second-worst performing jurisdiction in Australia, behind only the Northern Territory, when it comes to childhood vulnerability. This issue cannot be resolved with a silent response. What is needed in this area, as in so many others, is a strategic cross-portfolio approach. This is what I am hearing from the sector and from families. Rates of childhood developmental vulnerability in the ACT have increased significantly since 2009. We continue lagging behind other Australian jurisdictions and also behind countries like New Zealand which have acted urgently and boldly in this area.

The data, as the minister indicated, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the ACT is particularly alarming. The proportion of non-Indigenous children who are developmentally on track in all five domains has decreased from 50.9 per cent in 2009 to 44.6 per cent in 2024, a 6.3 percentage point decrease, which is very concerning. Meanwhile, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are developmentally on track in all five domains has decreased from 41 per cent in 2009 to just 24.1 per cent in 2024—less than a quarter. That is a 16.9 percentage point decrease. The rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are experiencing developmental vulnerability in one or more domains surpassed 50 per cent for the first time in the latest census. More than half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in our city are now considered developmentally vulnerable.

Not only are outcomes worsening for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but they are worsening at a far more rapid rate. This is despite the government's Closing the Gap commitments to the contrary, which include a target for 55 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be developmentally on track by 2031. But the figure has dropped from 41 per cent in 2009 to 24.1 per cent in 2024. When I spoke with the head of a well-known Aboriginal community-controlled organisation

about this earlier this year, she said to me, “The education programs do not help our kids when their problem is transport. They do not have a way to get to school.”

We need a genuinely cross-portfolio approach that addresses these entrenched drivers of disadvantages and promotes protective factors to address childhood vulnerability. At a minimum, of course, we need all children and families to have access to material basics here in the ACT: affordable, high-quality food; safe, secure housing; accessible, timely health care; as well as the early education opportunities importantly that prioritise children’s safety, learning and growth ahead of profit. By genuinely putting children first and doing so in a way that engages with the entirety of the child and their life circumstances, we can foster intergenerational wellbeing and create the conditions for people in our community to thrive throughout their lives.

One of the areas I want to touch on briefly—and on which I think more conversation is needed—is how we and our kids engage with technology. The federal government’s social media ban has brought this topic into focus, but the interventions and conversations need to begin much earlier. We know the brain, particularly the developing brain, is highly sensitive to social, emotional and sensory input. Meaningful face-to-face interactions build trust, attachment and social, emotional and cognitive development. By replacing such interactions with excessive screen use, we displace these critical developmental experiences.

Research reveals a growing global concern. Excessive screen exposure during critical early brain development stages is negatively impacting children’s cognitive, social and emotional growth. Of course, early screen use increases later screen dependency, perpetuating the cycle. This is a cultural change, a whole-of-society problem, but governments can and must play a role here as well. The ACT government moved far too slowly in getting phones out of schools. It would be a tragedy to see the obvious impacts of over-exposure to screens in the earlier years and fail to do more about it.

A meta-analysis of studies from 10 countries, including 15,000 children under the age of five, recently published in *JAMA Paediatrics*, showed multiple harms to their children’s development when parents use digital devices in their presence. Parental technology use was significantly associated with poorer cognition, poorer pro-social behaviour, lower levels of attachment, higher levels of internalising and externalising behaviour and, of course, higher levels of screen time among children.

Governments should do something about this. What can they do about it? France has a new law banning screens from public facilities where children under the age of three are cared for, including early childhood centres. Luxembourg’s “Children’s Eyes Shine Brightest Offline” campaign is positively spreading the message that excessive screen time can be harmful to children. Sweden is proactively promoting guidelines to regulate screen time among children, no screens for under two years and very limited to age 13.

Here governments have long known that the early years profoundly shape trajectories and outcomes, and this is reflected by the number of strategies and action plans reflected on by Minister Berry today. But we have not invested sufficiently in enough programs to help parents and carers, to help us, realise the detrimental effects of screen use on children’s brain function and also to act on that realisation by creating a space for more play-based learning and meaningful adult-child interactions, which I also acknowledge

is difficult in a cost-of-living crisis where more and more time is spent working.

Simple changes can make a big difference, and they start with seeing that there is a problem. I really think we need to have the courage to acknowledge this problem and others like it that are influencing outcomes for children in the ACT and to acknowledge our part in it, not just as legislators but also as parents and as role models. We cannot afford to continue implementing siloed responses to the failures reflected in today's ministerial statement.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Caretaker Conventions—Select Committee Reporting date—amendment

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (10.41): I move:

That, notwithstanding the terms of the Assembly's motion of 5 March 2025, the Select Committee on Caretaker Conventions present its report by 26 February 2026.

I rise today as Chair of the Select Committee on Caretaker Conventions to seek an extension of time to report on the inquiry into caretaker conventions. Since the committee's initial public hearing in June, further documents were released on 30 June 2025 in response to a freedom of information request. Following the review of a substantial number of documents released and the intervening estimates committee inquiries, on which I was a member, the committee undertook to hold a further public hearing with the Chief Minister on 2 October 2025. There were 20 questions taken on notice during the hearing.

As it stands, the committee is required to report by 4 December 2025. Given the upcoming annual reports processes and to provide sufficient time to incorporate the evidence from the 2 October hearing, the committee requests an extra 2½ months to inquire, with a new reporting date of 26 February 2026. We are conscious of not wishing to delay this inquiry further; however, we consider that the evidence received during the hearing and in response to questions taken on notice is important in shaping the committee's recommendations to government.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Assembly business No 2—postponement

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (10.43), by leave: I move:

That Assembly business notice No 2 be postponed to Thursday 23 October 2025.

As is the way with business that we list for Tuesday, sometimes we need a bit more time to speak through it and work through it. That is what has occurred in this case. Having had some very productive conversations between offices, we think that we can

work this out about coming to a consensus position. So, for that reason, we prefer to take the time to do that and deal with it instead on Thursday.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee Scrutiny report 11

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (10.44): I present the following report:

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee (Legislative Scrutiny Role)—Scrutiny Report 11, dated 14 October 2025, together with extracts of the relevant minutes of proceedings—

I seek leave to make a brief statement.

Leave granted.

MS BARRY: *Scrutiny report No 11* contains the committee's comments on 10 pieces of subordinate legislation, proposed amendments to one bill and three government responses. The report was circulated to members when the Assembly was not sitting.

I commend the report to the Assembly.

Public Accounts and Administration—Standing Committee Report 3

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (10.45): I present the following report:

Public Accounts and Administration—Standing Committee—Report 3—Inquiry into Public Sector (Closing the Gap) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, dated 20 October 2025, together with extracts of the relevant minutes of proceedings—

I move:

That the report be noted.

This is the third report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and Administration for the Eleventh Assembly. The committee received 18 submissions to the inquiry and held public hearings on 9 October. The report makes five recommendations, including that the bill be passed with amendments.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all those who contributed to the committee's inquiry during the hearings, particularly Hansard, Broadcasting and, of course, our committee secretaries. I commend the report to the Assembly.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Social Policy—Standing Committee Report 2

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (10.46): I present the following report:

Social Policy—Standing Committee—Report 2—Inquiry into Petition 017-25 and E-Petition 005-25—Closure of Burrangiri Aged Care Respite Centre in Rivett, dated 10 October 2025, together with extracts of the relevant minutes of proceedings—

I move:

That the report be noted.

This is the second report of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for the Eleventh Assembly. The committee began its inquiry on 23 April 2025 and received 25 submissions. On 14 May 2025, the Minister for Health announced in this chamber that Burrangiri would remain open for another two years. On behalf of the committee, I thank the government for making this decision.

The committee also wishes to take this opportunity to thank those who advocated tirelessly on behalf of the facility to the government, committee, other members of the Assembly and through the media. The submissions we received were a testament to both the necessity of aged-care respite in our community and the quality of the service offered at Burrangiri.

Our report makes nine recommendations. These recommendations seek to improve consultation and planning processes for the future of the Burrangiri facility but also ask the government to consider aged-care respite demand and capacity more broadly across the territory.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank the Minister for Health and officials and all those who submitted to the inquiry. In particular, I acknowledge those people who shared their personal and sometimes difficult experiences. I thank the other members who participated in this inquiry, our Deputy Chair Ms Barry, Miss Nuttall, Ms Tough and also Mr Hanson. The committee looks forward to the government's response to its recommendations. I commend the report to the Assembly.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.48): I would like to thank the committee for their work on this important ongoing issue. It is important to remember that Burrangiri is not just about aged care; it provides respite for all people. It provides respite to a wide range of people, including those with disabilities. It supports carers. It helps to avoid people being forced into aged care on discharge from hospital. A significant number of people are in hospital with nowhere to go, and respite provides an important option. The Burrangiri respite centre is a valuable community facility. We will keep advocating for this very important facility to remain open.

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi—Leader of the Opposition) (10.49): I rise to make a few brief comments. I was really thrilled to read this report. I think the recommendations are very sensible. We talk often about making sure we are patient-focused when we talk about health care, and it blows my mind that we keep having to say that.

These recommendations are about asking the government to talk to federal counterparts

about sufficient aged-care beds for the projected future demand and future funding decisions and report back in at least six months prior to the end of the new year. Clients and carers need to understand what is going on. We do need to understand those transitional arrangements. We cannot just hear that a centre is closing within two weeks and, “You have to sort something out.” It is also about that respite care, as Ms Carrick said. We would love to see that regularly published data. It would definitely help. It is about the dignity of our people who do need respite and aged care.

I would like to include some context on the issue that some of us might have forgotten. The outcome for Burrangiri was indeed great, and it was pushed by a number of people in this chamber. It was only possible because of the two motions that we brought on this issue to save Burrangiri. Because we were able to get that broad support we forced the government’s hand on this one. Let’s not forget that the government did apply quite a bit of pressure about it. They were desperate to try and make us change our course. They told us over and over that what we sought could not be done. They told us that it was not lawful, that the Procurement Act did not allow it and that it went against the Westminster principles of government. But, despite all of that, we pushed through in the Assembly here and we got it done.

We are thrilled with the outcome and are proud to support the community in the continuation of this essential service. There was a huge amount of effort and stress that the Liberal team put into finding a pathway that could actually deliver the outcome we needed and then seeing it through to the end. We stopped work on other things that mattered to us to make this a priority and make it a reality.

I respect all of our crossbench colleagues, but let’s keep in mind that they do not constitute a majority of votes in this place. They do not have a magic wand that allows them to single-handedly solve problems or achieve outcomes. Like every other party and member in this place, they have to work with others and secure broad support, and that is how it should be. That is how parliaments are meant to operate. We should be honest with the community about those facts.

If we pretend that any outcome is the result of one person, we risk misleading the community. We risk them believing that certain outcomes or reforms are possible without the hard work that is actually required. We risk the community losing faith in us when we promise that something will be easy and it turns out to be hard. Believe me, most of the issues we face in this place are hard ones and there are no easy answers or choices, which is why it is better if we are honest about that fact, honest about the challenges that we face and honest about how wonderful it is when we manage to overcome all of the difficulties and actually secure a good outcome for the community.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Liquor Amendment Bill 2025

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

Title read by Clerk.

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for Human Rights, Minister for City and Government Services and Minister for the Night-Time Economy) (10.53): I move:

That this bill be agreed to in principle.

I am pleased to introduce the Liquor Amendment Bill 2025 to the Assembly today. In doing so, I wish to acknowledge the previous minister who led this work and certainly got it underway, Mr Rattenbury. This bill introduces significant changes to the Liquor Act 2010 and Liquor Regulation 2010, creating a new framework for same-day delivery of alcohol within the territory.

It goes without saying that alcohol is a substance that many people choose to consume. Same-day alcohol delivery services—supplied through delivery on the same day it is ordered and purchased—provide a convenient and accessible service to Canberrans and have become a part of our local economy for business and delivery services. This was most pronounced—indeed accelerated—during the COVID-19 pandemic. Same-day delivery providers grew to include a licensee with a brick-and-mortar store, an online liquor retailer or an independent contractor who performs the delivery of the liquor.

In essence, same-day alcohol delivery is a service which grew faster than its regulatory environment. The consequences of a lack of regulation for this service has been revealed through the range of challenges and implications for vulnerable groups in our community, including those who are at risk of, or are being exposed to, negative effects of alcohol, not only those at home but also those workers undertaking deliveries.

Alcohol is an addictive substance. Alcohol has a significant relationship with violent behaviours, including but not limited to family and domestic violence. The health consequences of alcohol consumption and especially excessive alcohol consumption are well documented. Same-day delivery, having no limit on the amount of alcohol that can be ordered, no limit on the time that alcohol can be ordered and very quick delivery of the alcohol, has meant consumers are able to have uninterrupted consumption of alcohol without leaving their homes. Of course, this is not the behaviour that everyone is partaking in, but we do know that there have been some very serious examples.

Prolonged alcohol consumption in environments without checks and balances to ensure alcohol is being consumed responsibly can exacerbate the risk of alcohol-related harm, not only in relation to the consumer's own health but also in relation to its impacts on safety of individuals living with or otherwise engaging with the consumer.

As Minister for the Night-Time Economy, I certainly acknowledge that liquor has a major role in many pubs, clubs and venues. It is easy to forget when you are out having a drink with mates, on the dancefloor late at night or picking up a slab at your local bottle-o, but these venues are regulated—in fact, they are highly regulated. As regulated venues, they are required to apply for a licence, to meet conditions of that licence and to implement measures to support and protect the community from harm, including through the responsible service of alcohol.

I certainly acknowledge the success of this regulatory environment and note that it is thanks to a shared commitment by venue operators, workers and regulators in upholding

their obligations. Online sales of alcohol are not subject to the same regulatory environment. As same-day delivery services become as commonplace as going out for a drink, it follows that it is not unreasonable for commensurate protections to be put in place for the safety of the community.

While the ACT is today the first jurisdiction in Australia to introduce this legislation, the development of this bill has not been within the Canberra bubble. Rather, it has progressed as part of a national conversation. I particularly acknowledge the research and advocacy undertaken by the alcohol and other drug sector, including ATODA locally and the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education both nationally and directly in the ACT.

In 2024, a rapid review was undertaken by an expert panel on behalf of the commonwealth regarding evidence-based approaches to prevent gender-based violence. Recommendation 17 of the final report asked the government to work with the FARE and other organisations to review and strengthen the regulatory environment. This included a specific focus on alcohol sales and delivery timeframes. Implementing the recommendations were tasked to national cabinet. The South Australian government held a royal commission into domestic, family and sexual violence, which delivered a final report in August this year. Recommendation 128 of the royal commission called on reforms to liquor laws in line with the rapid review—several of which are captured within this bill.

The ACT government began engaging in a collaborative dialogue with community and liquor industry stakeholders about a possible framework around two years ago. I again acknowledge that it was the work of the previous minister, Mr Rattenbury, to begin this conversation. This included the publication of a discussion paper in the second half of 2023. It received a high level of engagement—406 contributions, including 288 survey responses and 20 written submissions from industry and community stakeholders and individuals.

In June 2024—by which stage I was the minister—the government published a Listening Report summarising the submissions. In receiving stakeholder support for reform, particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that considerations of alcohol harm minimisation and the potential impact of regulation on industry were front of mind. Further targeted discussions were held with key community and industry stakeholders, the Liquor Advisory Board and a range of government agencies to inform the drafting of, and then on the draft bill, earlier this year.

This bill seeks to balance wide range of feedback provided in a manner which is responsible, measured and meets its objectives without creating an outsize burden for industry in implementation—essentially, that, no matter how you are receiving liquor to consume, the same protections exist. This means achieving the objective of harm minimisation while retaining consumer choice. This means providing regulatory clarity for industry without encumbering economic development.

In that same vein, I acknowledge that industry has, to a certain degree, led its own self-regulation. A number of those safety measures already undertaken by some same-day delivery providers in the ACT are working well. Where that is the case, this bill aims to formalise those measures. Some measures also align the ACT with other jurisdictions

who have regulated some aspects already, particularly New South Wales, recognising that consistency across borders reduces complexity and facilitates compliance.

However, consultation with the community sector has elicited areas where regulatory controls need to go further, particularly as it relates to provisions aimed at harm minimisation—protecting consumers and protecting delivery persons—and the enforceability of these. The main components of the regulatory framework that this bill and the associated regulation provide for from a consumer’s perspective are alcohol deliveries limited to occur between the hours of 10 am and 10 pm daily; a two-hour safety pause mandated between the time of ordering and the delivery of alcohol; and a mechanism to cap the volume of alcohol that can be delivered in each 24-hour period. These are measures which are designed to address the situation that the unregulated environment provides for, which is unlimited delivery and potential unlimited consumption.

Feedback from public health stakeholders indicates that intoxication late at night—and particularly after midnight—has been identified as a significant contributor to family and other violence. Limiting the time period for delivery to occur, limiting the volume of the delivery and requiring a two-hour pause is about providing appropriate checks on a person’s consumption without unduly limiting their ability to enjoy the convenience of alcohol being delivered.

Licensees and delivery providers would be required to make necessary changes to their operations to ensure that they meet these obligations. But our framework is not prescriptive about how these entities will achieve these obligations and provides them with the flexibility to achieve them in the most efficient way for their business type. Importantly, these are measures that would not apply to the supply of liquor by exempt businesses, such as traveller accommodation, florists or gift makers, hairdressers, hospitals, home or residential care service providers, retirement villages, hospices or limousine or tour businesses. The two-hour delivery delay also does not apply if the liquor is delivered as part of a meal, where the liquor amount purchased is not excessive in proportion to the meal.

Additional protections for the consumer include a prohibition on alcohol being ordered by and delivered to individuals under 18; a prohibition on deliveries to certain places, including schools, bus and light rail stops, which are already prescribed alcohol-free places; facilitation of individual self-exclusion from receiving same-day delivery of alcohol delivery; and direct alcohol advertising. The purposes of these are, I believe, self-explanatory.

For our workers, the regulatory framework introduces new Responsible Service of Alcohol training specifically for same-day delivery people; new protections for delivery persons, including an offence for abusive, threatening or intimidating behaviour towards a delivery person; incident reporting requirements; and preventing victimisation of a delivery person for refusing to deliver alcohol in accordance with the same-day delivery framework. The regulatory framework also provides for same-day delivery data collection and recording to help assess the impact of these new measures as well as new offences to support the restrictions on same-day delivery of alcohol.

I recognise that the substantive elements of the bill may require significant lead-in time

for providers to adjust their business operations to achieve compliance. In recognition of this need and in response to industry feedback, those elements of the bill will have a delayed commencement date of up to 18 months.

What might be notably absent from this bill for some stakeholders relates to the regulation of alcohol marketing, particularly in the harm that is caused through promoting alcohol consumption to minors and other vulnerable groups. Alcohol advertising and marketing involves a combination of regulatory agencies at different levels of government, including the commonwealth, and self-regulation by industry. In undertaking the work for this bill, it was identified that we require more time to deeply consider the regulatory components and how to give effect to our objectives in this space. I look forward to updating the Assembly on this work at a later date.

The measures proposed under this bill aim to preserve convenience for consumers and to clarify expectations for delivery providers, while working to minimise the harm associated with the consumption of liquor, in accordance with the objects and the harm minimisation and community safety principles as already outlined in the Liquor Act 2010. However, I acknowledge that, while these have been public recommendations and part of a national conversation for some time, we are the first to introduce such significant legislation and some measures in this bill introduce some significant changes. Without wishing to be seen to be directing a committee, which will make its own decisions about whether to inquire on referral, I certainly would like to stress that, in my view, this bill would benefit from an inquiry.

Finally, in commending this bill to the chamber, I particularly acknowledge the very personal submissions we have received, both directly and through the work of our stakeholders. Those contributions reflected the wide-ranging and devastating impacts that alcohol-related harm can have not just on one affected individual but also on all of those closest to them. Through you, Mr Speaker, I sincerely thank them for their courage in what they have shared and trust that, through this bill, they feel seen and heard. I commend this legislation to the chamber.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Hanson**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Sitting suspended from 11.07 am to 2.00 pm.

Ministerial arrangements

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism and Trade) (2:00): Before we commence question time, I need to advise the chamber that, as is evident, Ministers Paterson, Cheyne and Steel are away from question time today, for a variety of personal reasons. So for question time I will assist members in Mr Steel's Treasury; planning and sustainable development; heritage; and transport portfolios. Minister Berry will take questions in the women; and prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence portfolios. Minister Stephen-Smith will assist in the government business; Attorney-General; and human rights portfolios. Minister Pettersson will assist in the night-time economy portfolio. And Minister Orr will take questions in the city and government services; police, fire and emergency services; corrections; and gaming reform portfolios.

Questions without notice

Government—performance

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Chief Minister. After a year in which you have delivered the largest budget deficit and the biggest debt in the Territory's history, despite 25 new and increased taxes and underfunding critical services such as health, education and community safety, Chief Minister, why are so many Canberrans losing faith in you and your government?

MR BARR: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question—an anticipated question, with today being the first anniversary since the election. I do not accept the premise of the question. Obviously, government is difficult, as I have indicated in public commentary to mark the first anniversary. Minority government is particularly difficult. The territory does face challenges. So too do other state and territory governments around the nation. We will work through the issues that we face in this period of time, just as we have worked through issues in years past. I accept there are challenges ahead. They include getting the budget back into balance, but there are other challenges that we face as well and we will remain focused on that task. Government is indeed a marathon, even in a four-year marathon. We are at the first-year mark, and we look forward to continuing to implement the program that we took to the people of Canberra at the election a year ago.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, why is your government failing at so many of its core functions?

MR BARR: Again, I do not accept the premise of the question. I acknowledge there are challenges. Challenges are being faced by every government at every level, and part of the role of government is to seek to respond to those challenges. We will do so. In many instances, we will require the support of other members of this place in order to put in place policy and other responses to respond to those challenges. They will come forward for the Assembly to consider in the usual manner, either through legislation or through budgetary and other measures that members are very familiar with. I believe the challenges can be overcome and we can work cooperatively together to make Canberra an even better place.

MR HANSON: Chief Minister, when will we actually see tangible improvements in core services like hospital EDs, school violence statistics, drug-driving results and the maintenance of our suburbs, to name but a few?

MR BARR: I thank the Deputy Leader of the Opposition for the question. I believe there have been significant improvements across those areas, but there has also been, in some instances, increased demand that we have had to manage. We have made significant investments in health infrastructure, including a new emergency department at Canberra Hospital, and we are progressing work on more health facilities, both at a community level, in terms of community health centres, and by working with the commonwealth to improve access to primary health care, and we are bringing forward reforms to expand the scope of practice for pharmacists, for example. We continue, through machinery of government changes, to focus on our municipal service priorities, and that is a key task of the new City and Environment Directorate. We look forward, through future budgets, to making further investments in these areas.

Housing—construction

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs. Minister, last week the ABS reported that dwelling commencements fell by 55 per cent over the last financial year. Why is new housing development collapsing under this government?

MS BERRY: I thank the opposition leader for her question. It is not collapsing, but it is becoming more challenging and complex to build housing across the city as different challenges face the Suburban Land Agency in their delivery of housing across the city. One of those is the discovery of a koala in Jacka, which meant that 189 homes could not be delivered. Those kinds of complexities mean that delivering land for housing is much more complex than it ever has been.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, how does the government expect to accommodate an extra 43,000 Canberrans by 2030 if new build activity remains at this level?

MS BERRY: We will carefully, through the Suburban Land Agency, work through these challenges, similar to the one that I have described, and we will meet the targets. We worked very carefully with the Suburban Land Agency in setting our target for 2030, and it is a target that we expect to meet.

MS MORRIS: Minister, is your failure to deliver new supply the reason housing affordability is so challenging for Canberrans?

MS BERRY: No, and I absolutely disagree with the premise of the question. I have just explained the complexity around delivery of land for housing. We will work through those challenges and complexities, noting that land in Canberra is finite and that we have to carefully navigate our way through a range of different complexities that we had not experienced so much before, like not having as much land to build on and that there are environmental, cultural and heritage issues that we need to overcome.

Lake Ginninderra—water quality

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water. I have now heard a number of incidents where family pets have become sick or died as a result of contact with the water of Lake Ginninderra. Minister, can you inform the chamber why Labor's approach to managing water quality is failing Canberrans and their pets?

MS ORR: Noting that I am also the Acting Minister for City and Government Services, which this question actually probably goes to, I will just answer the question with all hats on.

In the first instance, I would like to acknowledge the reports that two dogs have passed away after coming into contact with Lake Ginninderra and the surrounding areas and I think everyone in here who has a pet will completely agree that losing your pet is a very upsetting and traumatic experience and our thoughts are with those pet parents who have lost their animals.

As to Ms Castley's question of failing on lake quality, I do reject the premise of that question. This government is very much committed to improving the quality of our lakes. I am advised that the types of algae that have been present in Lake Ginninderra are naturally occurring but can become toxic if ingested by people or pets. City Services and the EPA work to monitor the lake during the swimming season. I am advised that they do tests which are updated weekly to inform on the quality of the lake and what the status of it is and signs are put up.

I appreciate none of this information takes away from the loss that the two families who have lost their pets will be feeling, and again, extend our condolences and thoughts to them, as we continue to look at how we can better communicate the safe use of the lake area.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, can you guarantee that Canberra's lakes and waterways will be safe and clean for use this summer?

MS ORR: The government has a range of assessments, processes and checks in place to provide the best and most up-to-date information for lake users and we will continue to implement those approaches and that information in a timely manner as best as we can to inform lake users.

Ms Castley: Point of order. I asked whether they would be ready for summer, safe and ready for summer, not on the reporting that the government already does. We want to know if they are ready for summer, December.

MR SPEAKER: Ms Orr, do you have anything else to add?

MS ORR: Mr Speaker, I can point Ms Castley to my previous answer where I did point to the weekly testing and the updating of signs. That takes in the summer period as well as the broader programs that I think Ms Castley was referring to in her point of order.

MS BARRY: Minister, how much money has the government invested in improving water quality and why have you not delivered better outcomes?

MS ORR: I would have to take the substance of that question on notice, given the timeframe that could take in it could be quite extensive and definitely pre-date my time in the portfolio.

Members interjecting—

MS ORR: Ignoring the interjections and continuing to answer the question Mr Speaker—

MR SPEAKER: Yes, please, please do ignore them.

MS ORR: Certainly, as to the second part, we have seen improvements in water quality. We will continue to work at improving our water quality. As most Canberrans will be aware, our lakes and our river system within the ACT—the lakes that we have are not necessarily natural lakes. They have been designed to be catchments for pollutants and

we continue to work through how best we can not only have these as catchments but, due to the fact that they do have a lot of pollutants in them, how we need to manage that.

Housing—Rent Relief Fund

MR RATTENBURY: My question is for the Attorney-General—or the minister covering that portfolio today. Minister, your government axed the Rent Relief Fund four months ago. Since then, based on Care Financial having provided an average of two grants every day over the life of the scheme until it closed on 4 July 2025, by today's date 220 households have not been able to get help to stay in their rental property. Minister, why has Care Financial not heard from the government since it said it would consult with stakeholders in the wake of axing the Rent Relief Fund and announced a new fund would replace it?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice as to any communication with Care Financial. I note that I recently had a chat with the new CEO of Care Financial just the other day—but not in a formal capacity.

It is important to recognise that the Rent Relief Fund was originally intended as a short-term, cost-of-living relief measure that was introduced during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. It was not introduced or intended to be a long-term measure, and, therefore, did not have recurrent funding. However, recognising the feedback that has been received both from service providers and the community about the impacts of the cessation of the funds, the government is considering re-establishing a slightly different version of the fund to assist people who are struggling to pay their rent.

The Chief Minister, as well as the Attorney-General, has talked about this. Details of a possible program are being carefully considered by government to ensure that a comprehensive approach can be taken to this complex issue that achieves the best outcomes for the community. As the Chief Minister has previously publicly indicated, the Rent Relief Fund was administered in relation to providing a direct grant to help tenants who were experiencing rental stress or severe financial hardship. It went straight to a landlord, which did not necessarily take into account the fact that many people pay their rent on direct debit. It is the first thing that comes out. When they are experiencing financial hardship, it may be other costs that are more urgent or that they need a one-off payment to help with. That is one of the things that is being taken into consideration.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, what is the process or timeframe for developing a new replacement for the Rent Relief Fund that you just spoke of?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Rattenbury for this supplementary question, and also for his first question. In August 2025, ministers met with community service providers during the round table to hear and understand the views and experiences of frontline organisations who are assisting those who are struggling to pay their rent. The government committed to supporting those who are struggling with cost-of-living pressures. As I said, a possible re-established rent relief fund of some kind is being considered in the short term, with longer-term supportive measure also being considered.

Noting some feedback about the earlier iterations of a rent relief fund being a bandaid solution, a possible new program would need to consider how it can have a more holistic supportive approach for people who are facing financial strain. Again, any future program will need to consider whether eligibility criteria should be amended, or if program parameters should be expanded, such as by being extended to include other cost-of-living pressures that renters may face.

At this stage, I am not able to provide Mr Rattenbury or the Assembly with a firm timeline in relation to future decisions—as Mr Rattenbury would be aware. Those decisions will be subject to a range of government processes. What I can tell Mr Rattenbury and the Assembly is that the work is well underway.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, what temporary support measures is the government considering adopting and in what timeframe, given you told the Assembly: “Should the government receive advice this will take a significant period of time, we will look to temporary support measures and how we can adopt those”?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am not sure if Mr Braddock was quoting me from earlier. I do not think I said “a considerable amount of time”. As I indicated to Mr Rattenbury, work is currently underway. We do, of course, have a range of supports that are already available for people through the emergency, material and financial aid system and the existing supports through Care Financial.

I certainly encourage anyone who is in a situation of financial hardship to contact Care Financial. While this specific measure is not available to people, there are a range of other financial supports and arrangements that can be put in place with providers of utilities and with ACT government offices. There are potentially negotiations that can be had with landlords. Care Financial can support people in managing all of those complex processes and understanding how they can improve their own financial situations.

So it is not as if the Rent Relief Fund was the only thing that previously existed. And, as I said, work is underway. I am sure that announcements will be forthcoming in due course.

Education—languages

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for Education. Many students learning languages in our public education system rely on the existence of a specialist, external senior secondary languages provider, which has been offered up to this point by CIT Solutions. Minister, why has a decision not already been made and communicated to families about the future of the delivery of an external senior secondary languages offering in the ACT, given that CIT Solutions is being wound up and almost all 2026 student enrolments in colleges will already have been finalised?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Emerson for his question, and note that CIT Solutions and the Education and Training Directorate are working together to investigate and consider a solution to the issues that Mr Emerson raised around learning languages through CIT Solutions—including whether some of those languages can be offered through our college system. I do not have an update at this point in time. If I have information to

provide to the Assembly through these sitting periods then I will.

MR EMERSON: Minister, will the education directorate consider taking over management of the external senior secondary languages school, given the unique need fulfilled by that school and that the program operates on a cost-recovery basis?

MS BERRY: No. That is not a decision that the ACT government or the education directorate are considering at this point in time. That is not a decision that would be made, in any case, during a question from question time. If I can find further advice or an update for the community on the communications between education ACT and CIT Solutions, I will bring that to the Assembly.

MS CARRICK: What, specifically, is the government doing to support language studies for Year 11 and Year 10 students affected by CIT Solutions being wound up?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Carrick for the question and say that, on individuals that have been speaking with the education directorate or colleges regarding their language studies, we have been working with individuals to try to seek an outcome that is suitable for them, so that can continue on with their studies. As I said, if there is another, broader response to this through CIT Solutions and/or the education directorate, I will bring that information back to the Assembly.

Infrastructure—project costs

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Chief Minister, and it is about economic development.

Chief Minister, in your ministerial statement this morning, you stated that your government is delivering a range of transformative projects that will revitalise the way Canberrans will experience and enjoy our city centre. These projects include the extension of the light rail to Commonwealth Park, the raising of London Circuit, development of the Acton waterfront, the new UNSW city campus, construction of a new Lyric Theatre, and the new Canberra aquatic centre and convention centre and its entertainment precinct. Can you provide an indicative cost and timeframe for each project in the city, so that we can understand the impact on the budget and borrowings?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Carrick for the question. The answer to most of those project line items is contained within the budget papers, or will be revealed upon the successful procurement of those projects. A number of them, obviously, attract a 50 per cent commonwealth funding contribution; light rail would be an example. I think the cost of that is very well known, and it has been discussed and debated for some time.

In relation to the other projects, I would refer Ms Carrick to previous public statements. I will not go through the full list for each one, but it is in the budget papers. Where we are yet to procure and have a final contract cost, once we have procured and have a final contract cost, that will be made public.

MS CARRICK: Chief Minister, what percentage of the investment pipeline will be allocated to these projects, and what impact will that have on the delivery of the many projects needed outside the city centre, many of which have been in planning for over

a decade?

MR BARR: The bulk of the government's infrastructure expenditure is outside the city centre, as Ms Carrick would be aware. I am looking at the cost, for example, of the Canberra Hospital expansion, the cost of roadworks and major road duplications around the ACT, the cost of new schools in each of our suburbs, and the cost undertaken by the Suburban Land Agency in relation to the development of new suburbs and new estates. They total probably more than \$10 billion, just across all of those things.

To build a new suburb involves billions of dollars of infrastructure that sits under the ground—all the necessary electrical, water and sewerage connections, all the clearing of land, and the construction of roads and schools. All of that public infrastructure across about 15 new suburbs in Gungahlin and Molonglo over the last decade would constitute billions of dollars of expenditure.

I think the thrust of the question is that somehow the city is getting a disproportionate level of expenditure. That is not reflected in the total spend across both the general government sector and our public trading enterprises. The point I would make about those city infrastructure pieces that she has listed is that they are for the entire Canberra population. Canberra is a city of 500,000 people. We are all Canberrans, and we are all Canberrans first. Ahead of any other allegiance we may have to a suburb or a region, we are Canberrans. If we stop being Canberrans and start to decide that we are from Woden rather than from Canberra, that is a problem for us, because we are too small to break up into little tribes. We are one great community of nearly half a million people, and Canberra will only succeed if we stick together as Canberrans.

MR EMERSON: Chief Minister, can you outline the governance arrangements for these precincts and projects which will ensure that the government achieves the transformation that you are seeking?

MR BARR: In many instances, the governance arrangements involve Infrastructure Canberra and independent project governance boards. The City Renewal Authority has a role in broader precinct planning, and we have an intersection with the National Capital Authority in the commonwealth government in relation to particular precincts.

For example, in Belconnen, in the Bruce sports, education and health precinct, there is work between the ACT government, multiple ACT government agencies and the commonwealth, through the commonwealth department of infrastructure and territories. We have a National Capital Authority co-partnership in relation to, for example, the Commonwealth Park master plan. In other instances, we have our own independent project governance boards for each of those major infrastructure projects. That information is publicly available through a very simple web search.

Infrastructure—project updates

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Chief Minister. Could you update the Assembly on the progress of the major city infrastructure projects?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question. There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a very significant transformation of our city centre. We are putting

the finishing touches now on the Raising London Circuit project, which is a major step in reconnecting our city centre. Works approval has been launched for the new Lyric Theatre. Construction is almost ready to begin on the next stage of the Acton Waterfront lakeside public park. Construction has now officially started on the new University of New South Wales Canberra City campus. At the same time, consultation has opened on the Canberra aquatic centre in Commonwealth Park, which of course will help shape the future of the new Canberra Convention and Entertainment Precinct. Additionally, there are upgrades underway to Garema Place, with stage 1 due for completion by the end of this year.

The government understands these works have been disruptive, but they are part of building something that will benefit all Canberrans for decades to come. We are at the peak disruption period now. Things will start to settle down as we move through 2026 and 2027, and most of the projects will, in fact, be finished by 2028.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Chief Minister, why is it important to invest in the city centre? And how does this work position the territory for future growth and opportunity?

MR BARR: The city centre and investment in it is about shaping our city's future to maintain its national and international competitiveness. The city centre is a place where more than 50,000 people come to work every day, and tens of thousands of people live within walking distance of the city centre. It is the biggest conglomerate of economic activity in Canberra. We are now approaching half a million residents for our city. We are projected to keep on growing, so we are planning for that growth. We are working with the commonwealth on forward-looking approaches to adaptively re-use and re-utilise spaces within the CBD to accommodate more residents, more students and more business and commercial activity as our city centre evolves. As these projects take shape, we will see more people living and working in the city centre. This aligns with the vision for a more compact and connected Canberra, where housing is close to jobs, public transport, retail, services and entertainment.

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, how will major projects like the new Lyric Theatre, Acton Waterfront and the new UNSW Canberra City campus reshape our city?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary. The major projects position Canberra to remain one of the world's most liveable cities, to be future-ready and to be an attractive destination for investment that is sourced locally, nationally and internationally. One example: by reconnecting the city to Lake Burley Griffin, we overcome a longstanding physical divide and will create new spaces for people—places where there might be more people than rabbits! We will improve connectivity and enhance amenity between our city centre and the Lake Burley Griffin waterfront.

I was pleased to be able to break ground on the new University of New South Wales Canberra City campus yesterday. It is a significant investment in driving innovation and growth to position Canberra as Australia's knowledge capital. The new aquatic centre will deliver modern and accessible facilities for swimming and fitness for a catchment of more than 100,000 people in the immediate precinct, but with connectivity for every Canberran to be able to use a facility of territory standard. The Lyric Theatre is a significant development for all of Canberra. Every Canberran can enjoy that new

facility and the events and shows that it will bring to Canberra that are currently not possible in our 1965 small and outdated theatre. These are big projects for Canberra's future, but they are projects for all Canberrans, regardless of where in the territory they live.

Housing—National Housing Accord

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs. The government signed up to deliver 30,000 new homes by 2030. To meet that commitment 5,000 homes are needed to be completed each year. The Chief Minister said today:

This government is continuing to play our part in the nation-wide efforts to increase the supply of housing.

But in 2024-25 only around 4,000 dwellings were completed, and the MBA and the Property Council are pretty concerned. What is the government doing to address this shortfall of 1,000 homes?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Clay for her question. I note that the Indicative Land Release Program is less than two per cent of the ACT's total established housing, which is around 200,000. So I think we need to keep in mind that, while the ACT government plays a very important role, we are not the only organisation that provides housing in the ACT.

We have made a commitment to build 30,000 homes between now and 2030. Yes, we could divvy it up in a simple rounded number like 5,000 a year; however, construction is never linear and so there will be years when we fall behind. Yes, in this budget period, the Suburban Land Agency has fallen behind in its delivery, for a range of reasons, including one that I highlighted earlier around the discovery of a koala, which meant that 189 homes are not being delivered. There are also a range of other complexities in building, particularly in greenfield areas but not confined to those spaces. That includes brownfields development as well.

The commitment still stands. The target is still 30,000, and the government intends to deliver on that target.

MS CLAY: Noting that the Suburban Land Agency fell short of their target, what is the government doing to address the SLA shortfall of 40 public homes and 432 community homes?

MS BERRY: Again, it has not fallen short of its target of 30,000. This year it has under-delivered to the 5,000, if you were going to suggest that construction was going to be linear across each year. It is committed to delivering the 30,000 new homes by 2030 and, in addition to that, affordable community and public housing properties. Those will be made up in future years, as has been the case in other years, in developing homes across the ACT.

Ms Clay: Point of order on relevance. The question was: what is the government doing to address the SLA shortfall of 40 public homes and 432 public homes? It was not about

the 30,000; it was about the SLA land release target, which was quite specific: 40 and 432.

MR SPEAKER: Ms Berry, I don't know if you have anything else to add. I certainly formed a view from this chair that Ms Berry did answer the question as regards the non-linear timeline of the wider promise of the 30,000. I know that that does not necessarily suit, but I think she has been quite relevant. You can have a crack with further points of order if you want.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, what was the feedback from Housing ACT and the Suburban Land Agency when you consulted them before setting targets for the release of public, community and affordable homes?

MS BERRY: I might take that on notice, because I am not quite sure I understand the depth of the information that Mr Rattenbury is seeking here. So I will take that on notice and see if I can better understand the question.

MR SPEAKER: I think that goes to your point of order, Ms Clay. I think we ended up talking about two different things, and I am pleased that we are taking that on notice.

Sport and recreation—Stromlo-Cotter mountain bike trail

MISS NUTTALL: My question was to the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development. It relates to the Stromlo mountain biking trails. Minister, I would like to ask about the Stromlo to Cotter mountain biking trail. Last week, the company Dirt Art, which had been granted the tender to work on the trail, entered administration. What impact on the projected timeline for the trail's completion will this have?

MR BARR: I will need to take that question on notice and seek that information on Minister Steel's behalf.

MISS NUTTALL: How much of the work Dirt Art had been contracted to do has already been completed? Will a new tender process be required to replace them for the remainder?

MR BARR: Again, I will take that on notice for Minister Steel.

MS CLAY: Is the trail on track to be within the expected budget and timeframes?

MR BARR: I certainly hope so Ms Clay, but I will need to take that on notice on behalf of Minister Steel.

Roads—Commonwealth Avenue Bridge works

MR BRADDOCK: My question is for the Chief Minister, in lieu of the Minister for Transport. I note the National Capital Authority's update today on the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge works. It posits one lane for general traffic in each direction across the bridge, plus a northbound lane for buses and emergency vehicles. Is this plan consistent with what the ACT government was advocating for? If not—or not entirely—how does

it vary?

MR BARR: Thank you. Following some considerable engagement between the government and the National Capital Authority, that outcome of a three-lane configuration which features two lanes of shared traffic—one in each direction—and then in a priority lane for buses and emergency services vehicles heading north into the city was the preferred option.

None of the options are ideal; they all come with a degree of compromise. If it could put it in these terms: that option is the least-disruptive and the least-worse option available to the NCA when they force six lanes of traffic into three. We did need to maintain a lane north and south, so we only had one lane with flexibility. That lane with flexibility has been dedicated to public transport and emergency service vehicles.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, will northbound buses and emergency vehicles need to merge with all other traffic into one lane near Albert Hall, before moving to the eastern side via the newly constructed crossover lane?

MR BARR: That is a level of detail I do not have in front of me. I know there will need to be a cross-traffic arrangement, but I suspect it will be possible to maintain a continuous lane for that northbound connection. I suspect that will be possible. But it is the National Capital Authority's project; it is not the ACT government's project, so I will need to seek some advice from them. But my understanding is that—as difficult and challenging as it is going to be—they will do their best to maintain three lanes of efficient flow over the bridge, whilst the other bridge is being repaired. Then they will switch it over after the completion of repairs to the first span of the bridge.

It is going to be two challenging years. People will, no doubt, make adjustments to their use of Commonwealth Avenue Bridge over that time. It was necessary to maintain one lane of traffic in either direction, and I think it was a sensible decision to prioritise public transport and emergency service vehicles with the remaining lane.

Mr Braddock: I have a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can I just clarify that the Chief Minister took that question on notice?

MR SPEAKER: I cannot even remember!

MR BARR: I provided a level of detail. If what I said is incorrect or there is further information that I can provide from the National Capital Authority, I will take that on notice. It may be that what I have said is absolutely all the information that there is. Of course, there is a website for the National Capital Authority, and Mr Braddock could have a look at that as well.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, when can Canberrans expect to see a 2026 public transport network design that reflects these changes?

MR BARR: I am advised that it will be in coming weeks.

Schools—safety

MR HANSON: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, violent incidents in ACT public schools have reached record highs. According to the 2024-25 education directorate annual report, 9,627 occupational violence incidents were reported; an approximate 31 per cent increase from last year. Minister, why have violent incidents in ACT public schools reached record highs?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Hanson for his question. Unfortunately, these violent incidents and bullying behaviour are a challenge for all schools across the country, which is why the federal minister has announced—with education ministers, last Friday—a specific campaign to target bullying in our schools, which includes these violence incidents to which Mr Hanson is referring. That included \$5 million into programs, and \$5 million into an awareness campaign. Note that schools can only do what they can within school hours; outside of school hours needs to be addressed as well. We are also seeing the consequences of that behaviour in occupational violence issues with our staff and other students, and one of the reasons why schools have been spending more funding on their—

Mr Hanson: Mr Speaker, on a matter of relevance—

MR SPEAKER: Stop the clock, please.

Mr Hanson: The question was why those incidents have increased. The minister is talking about the federal government's response and the effects of those incidents on staff. But what I am trying to get to with this question is, "Why has it increased?"

MR SPEAKER: Mr Hanson, I think that the minister, in her answer, referred to a national trend of bullying and violence in schools, and referred to that federal funding as a reflection of that national increase. So, I do not believe there is a point of order. Ms Berry, have you got more?

MS BERRY: I can expand a little on the reasons. Whilst I am not sure that there is specific data, there are a number of circumstances that can be pointed to that could be causing behaviour in our schools around bullying and violence. Some of it goes towards the long tail of COVID, and some of those students who were at school during the COVID years not having the social experiences that other children would have been having. So, coming into school without those experiences means that they might communicate in different ways—which is unacceptable. We have already talked about internet use and the federal government's change to the ability for children under the age of 16—(*Time expired.*)

MR HANSON: Minister, are the ACT government's current programs on addressing school violence working? If not, why not?

MS BERRY: A program at a point in time might resolve an issue in response to a situation that might occur, however, a cultural shift is what is needed in our schools. This is what the ACT government and the education directorate are doing with regard to their implementation of the Positive Behaviours for Learning program. There are a range of different approaches in our schools, which takes around five years for the full program to be implemented. But it is more than just a point-in-time response; it is about a shift in culture where students and teachers understand the expectations of each other

and behaviour in schools. I could not tell you whether that is working right now. It is something that we have to test. But the research for other countries—and for other states and territories who have implemented it—show that it does work, and it is successful. It just takes some time to deliver. In the meantime, we will work with the federal government on the programs that they have put out around the bullying funding—the \$10 million—as well as the coming change to social media access for 16-year-olds.

MS MORRIS: Minister, how are staff being supported to manage the surge in violent incidents?

MS BERRY: One of the things that is delivered through the Positive Behaviours for Learning program is about supporting teachers to understand and work with complex behaviours, and de-escalation of student misbehaviour—and understand students' complex lives and families' complex lives. It is not an easy, black-and-white answer. There is no silver bullet. However, the education directorate is working with school staff and their unions, to better understand how we can support staff to manage this escalating behaviour which we are seeing in our schools, no doubt. I am also hoping that the school funding review will provide some more answers for us on how we can respond better to these circumstances.

Schools—safety

MR HANSON: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, the 2024-25 Education Directorate annual report shows an additional 958 reports that detailed impacts on staff wellbeing, as a direct result of student or parent behaviour. Minister, what are the parent behaviours that are impacting on staff wellbeing?

MS BERRY: A range of different behaviours might be experienced by teachers and staff in our schools. A parent's behaviour might be escalated, and they might speak inappropriately. They might email constantly, outside work hours. They might speak to a teacher or a staff member disrespectfully or in an inappropriate way. A staff member may feel threatened. It is all of those and a range of others that schoolteachers and school staff are experiencing from some parents.

We have over 50,000 students in our public schools, so there are probably twice that number of parents. Most parents are very well behaved and respect schools as environments that are safe for them and their children. For those that do not, however, it does mean that schoolteachers and staff are put at risk. In those circumstances, there is a range of actions that can be taken by schools, including reporting an incident to police, if it meets the threshold, to get protection orders. That has occurred in a small number of cases; nonetheless there have been a few. Schools then work on safety plans for their staff, ensuring that teachers, staff and parents have good working relationships going forward.

It is not an easy matter to overcome. However, the directorate is making sure that we engage with school staff and their unions in ways that can overcome these kinds of challenges, and working with ACT parents as well, to understand how we can better support parents who may have a range of challenges and conflict issues in their lives.

MR HANSON: Minister, beyond reporting to police, what measures are in place for principals and teachers to deal with problematic behaviour from parents?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Hanson for the supplementary. There are a range of policies in place. Some of those are available, I believe, on the education directorate website. If there is something that is of more assistance, I can bring that back to the Assembly, around policies, processes and procedures for managing those kinds of circumstances.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, what resources do staff have when they are subjected to repeated behaviours from parents?

MS BERRY: Thank you for the supplementary. As I said, I put the caveat around it that it is a smallish number of parents. It is not that every parent is creating an unsafe work environment. There are some parents, however, for a range of different reasons, that do. If school staff are union members, of course, they can go to their unions for support. They can go through their school leadership for support. They can also go to the Education Directorate for support in managing those circumstances.

Social housing—maintenance

MS BARRY: My question is to the Minister for Homes and New Suburbs. Minister, can you please confirm reports that the government has already spent its public housing maintenance budget, and that there will be no further works this financial year?

MS BERRY: I do not believe that is so, but I will take that question on notice. There would be information in the budget papers, but I will take that question on notice and will come back to the Assembly.

MS BARRY: Minister, can you explain how a full year's budget has been spent in less than four months?

MS BERRY: I will take that question on notice.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, what guarantees can you give to the builders, carpenters, plumbers, sparkies and other tradies that they will continue to have work in repairing and maintaining social housing properties in the ACT?

MS BERRY: I do not think I believe that what Ms Chiaka Barry has said regarding the funding to housing repairs and maintenance is true, so, in answer to the question from the Leader of the Opposition, I believe the work will be continuing, so they will be employed.

ACT Ambulance Service—staffing

MS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister representing the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services. In question time on 24 September Minister Paterson confirmed that ambulance staffing shortages have not affected response times and have had no impact on patient care. Minister, what impact is the staffing shortfall having on ambulance officer morale and wellbeing?

MS ORR: I will take that question on notice and come back to Ms Morris with an answer.

MS MORRIS: Minister, have any ACT Ambulance stations faced reduced operating hours since 14 August 2025?

MS ORR: Again, I will take that question on notice.

MS CASTLEY: Would the minister be able to provide a comment to the self-described burnt-out and extremely concerned ACT paramedic who was disappointed with the previous response on 24 September?

MS ORR: Again, I will have to take that on notice. Acknowledging that Ms Castley is referring to a particular individual, my response in taking it on notice might be disappointing to that individual. But I do ask for understanding given that I am filling in for this portfolio and will need to seek advice.

Skilled training and apprenticeships—support

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations. A recent report by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research found that in the ACT commencements for apprenticeships and trainees were down by 13.7 per cent for the last 12-month period ending 31 March. Minister, why has the ACT government failed to increase apprenticeship and traineeship commencements?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Milligan for the question. As Mr Milligan would know, in the most recent budget the ACT government has increased subsidies to 90 per cent for training for six key construction related trades. This is an investment by the ACT government in supporting the skills needs that our growing city needs. However, I do acknowledge some of the figures that Mr Milligan has cited. There are challenges in commencements and in enrolments across higher education. I attribute that to a range of reasons. Most notably, we are in a very tight labour market. So my observation would be that many people are not undertaking training to get into the jobs that they have previously needed training for, because of the very tight labour market.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, you mentioned that there are challenges facing putting on traineeships and apprenticeships. Can you identify what those challenges are?

MR PETTERSSON: There are a range of challenges that are identified by employers when they are making the decision to put on an apprentice. Research done at the national level goes to the costs borne by the individual employer, which is why the decision by the ACT government to raise subsidies to 90 per cent for six key construction trades is so important.

MS CASTLEY: How does the minister expect the government to deliver their promised infrastructure pipeline with fewer trainees and apprentices?

MR PETTERSSON: Ms Castley's question is a good one. It will be challenging to build the houses that our growing city needs without the workforce that can build them,

which is why we are committed to building our workforce. That may not be a straight up and down linear path. The government, working in conjunction with the commonwealth government through the National Skills Agreement, is committed to developing the skills needs that our growing city needs. Part of that is increasing subsidies for training. It is also in the provision of free TAFE in which we are very proud to partner with the commonwealth government. A key focus of the expansion of free TAFE has been in the construction industry. This will remain an area of focus for the ACT and all jurisdictions in Australia.

Justice—youth justice

MS TOUGH: My question is to the Minister for Children, Youth and Families. Minister, what is this government doing to support and celebrate the ACT's youth justice workers?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Tough for the question. On Tuesday last week I had the immense privilege of celebrating Australasian Youth Justice Acknowledgement Day. This was an opportunity for me to spend some time with youth justice workers and celebrate the valuable work these professionals do in our community.

I was particularly pleased to celebrate the winners at the ACT Youth Justice Awards ceremony. The ceremony was an opportunity to hear about the incredible work occurring in the sector. Congratulations, again, to Belinda Garcia, who won the individual award for Exceptional Practice due to her unwavering commitment to preventing young people from coming into or returning to the youth justice system.

The team award for Exceptional Practice went to the Recidivist Offender Multi-Agency Round Table or ROMART. It is a multi-agency case management body made up of representatives from ACT Policing; Children, Youth and Families; and the therapeutic support team. ROMART is a true collaboration across government to help identify causation and offending behaviour and intervention opportunities for young people engaged in youth justice.

The award ceremony is one example of how we amplify the work of youth justice workers to show our support and celebrate their work. Other activities include a comprehensive recruitment and training process to support first-time youth workers to be job ready, and doing what we can to ensure there is a full complement of staff—as well as listening to staff wherever possible when they identify changes that need to be made in the system.

MS TOUGH: Minister, how is the government maintaining a strong youth justice workforce?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary question. Bimberi holds two to three recruitment rounds each year, in recognition that we need to ensure we have adequate staffing numbers to meet the fluctuating numbers of young people in the facility. These recruitment rounds are followed by a seven-week induction program, where Bimberi draws on specialist expertise from external sources for the training. This includes input from Canberra Health Services, the Australian Childhood Foundation and the Human Rights Commission.

Following the induction, staff participate in two weeks of buddy shifts so that they are supported to implement what they learnt in their training. This is followed by ongoing refresher training provided to all operational staff, to ensure fundamental skills are maintained and that best practice standards are applied.

At the Bimberi event last week I was able to meet with some of the 13 new youth workers who will be part of the operational team by mid-November. It is wonderful to see how enthusiastic they all are to make a real difference in our community.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how is the ACT government ensuring we continue to focus on youth justice in the longer term?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the supplementary question. As members would be aware, I recently announced the development of a youth justice strategic plan in response to the ACT Inspector of Custodial Services' *Healthy centre review of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre 2024*.

The strategic plan will be pivotal in providing a long-term roadmap to strengthen the youth justice system and deliver on the government's commitments to improving outcomes for young people. The plan will consider recommendations from previous reports, including the Jumbunna Institute's final report on its independent *Review into over-representation of First Nations people in the ACT justice system*. It will also aim to drive real change in our Closing the Gap agreement—specifically, targeting our commitment to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Islander young people in detention by at least 30 per cent by 2031.

I look forward to working in close partnership with our sector to develop the strategic plan and complementary frameworks to take us forward.

Multicultural affairs—peak bodies

MS BARRY: My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Minister, what process do you use to identify which community organisations you deal with as peak bodies?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Barry for the question. I do not necessarily think there is a process or framework for that. I engage with all multicultural groups that come to my door. I have an open-door policy, Mr Speaker. I speak frequently with community groups and community leaders across the entire spectrum—from large, well-organised organisations to very small, beginning organisations.

MS BARRY: Minister, how do you decide which organisations you will deal with where there are multiple representative organisations?

MR PETTERSSON: I do my very best to meet with all organisations.

MR HANSON: Minister, are you aware of any concerns from community groups that you have been picking winners and sidelining other communities?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Hanson for the supplementary question. That is a surprising question to me, Mr Speaker, as I speak with the vast, vast majority of groups that seek to have a meeting with me. The few times that meeting requests are not accepted are largely when it is from an individual and we cannot identify an association with an organisation, or if there are potentially scheduling issues. I do my very best to make it to as many multicultural events as I can.

If the member is aware of a particular group that does not feel like they have had an opportunity to engage with me directly—acknowledging that I am not the only source of interaction with the ACT government, either as responsibility for multicultural affairs—I would direct members’ attention to the ministerial advisory council. I also acknowledge that many members in this place hold many responsibilities, either to their portfolios or to their electorates, and I encourage lots of engagement—not necessarily just through me. However, I do always enjoy interacting with multicultural community groups, organisations and leaders so I am looking forward to receiving information from the opposition as to who they think I have not had opportunity to meet with, and I will see what we can do to rectify the situation.

Mr Barr: On that cheery note, Mr Speaker, I will ask that all further questions be placed on the notice paper.

Supplementary answers to questions without notice Multicultural affairs—peak bodies—standing order 118AA

MS BARRY: The Minister for Multicultural Affairs did not answer my question. The first question was, what process do you use to identify which community organisations you deal with as peak bodies?

MR SPEAKER: So you are raising that under 118AA?

MS BARRY: That is correct.

MR SPEAKER: We will have a look at the *Hansard* and we will consider. My first instinct is that the minister did answer the question, but we will go back and have a look and I will have a response for you by the end of the day.

Education—languages

MS BERRY: I cannot remember actually the question Mr Emerson asked me and I am hoping this information will respond to the question I took on notice with regard to CIT Solutions. So I will just give that information now and it will probably answer some of the questions that I might not have answered completely.

CIT has confirmed that they will deliver the existing language programs through to the end of 2025 to allow all current Year 11 and Year 12 students to complete their studies and receive full accreditation under the BSSS requirements. CIT has also written to Year 11 students in the program to let them know that they will teach these students in Year 12 in 2026.

CIT is working closely with BSSS and the Education Directorate to establish

arrangements for future delivery of language courses in 2026. Students seeking access to a curriculum choice that is not in their priority enrolment area high school or college can be considered for an out of area enrolment at a category B school that offers their chosen course language. For colleges, this applies to BSSS approved courses, including languages, however, it is subject to capacity and only if a course is not offered at a student's priority enrolment area school. For high schools, this applies to languages only.

Papers

Mr Speaker presented the following papers:

Annual Reports (Government Agencies) Act, pursuant to section 15—Annual Reports 2024-2025—

ACT Auditor-General's Report No 6/2025, dated 8 October 2025.

ACT Electoral Commission, dated 9 September 2025.

ACT Integrity Commission, dated October 2025.

ACT Ombudsman & Inspector of the ACT Integrity Commission, dated 3 October 2025.

Office of the Legislative Assembly, dated October 2025.

Estimates 2025-2026—Select Committee, pursuant to standing order 253A—

Answer to Question on Notice—

No 155, dated 15 September 2025.

No 161, dated 7 October 2025.

No 226, dated 28 August 2025.

No 299, dated 10 September 2025.

No 303, dated 16 September 2025.

No 313, dated 29 August 2025.

No 332, dated 4 September 2025.

No 341, dated 29 August 2025.

Answer to Question Taken on Notice No 139, dated 23 September 2025.

Schedule of unanswered questions after the tabling of the report of the Estimates Committee 2025-2026.

Freedom of Information Act, pursuant to section 67—A report on the operation of the *Freedom of Information Act 2016*—ACT Ombudsman—Annual Report 2024-2025, undated.

Integrity Commission and Statutory Office Holders—Standing Committee—Report 2—Inquiry into the effectiveness of transparency arrangements for Members of the Legislative Assembly—Interim Report—Speaker's response to recommendations 1 and 4, dated 20 October 2025.

Standing order—

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

e-petition 019-25 and pet-036-25—Charles Conder Primary School—Parking

improvement—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Transport and City Services, dated 16 October 2025.

e-petition 027-25—Point Hut Dog Exercise Area—Objection to closure—Letter to the Speaker from the Chair, Standing Committee on Transport and City Services, dated 16 October 2025.

191—Amendments to the Workplace Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 (No 2), dated 29 September 2025.

Ms Stephen-Smith, pursuant to standing order 211, presented the following papers:

Annual Reports (Government Agencies) Act, pursuant to section 13—Annual Reports—2024-2025—

ACT Gambling and Racing Commission, dated 19 September 2025.

ACT Health Directorate, dated 26 September 2025.

ACT Human Rights Commission, dated 3 October 2025.

ACT Inspector of Custodial Services, dated October 2025.

ACT Insurance Authority, dated 12 September 2025.

ACT Policing Special Purposes, dated 26 September 2025.

ACT Policing, dated 26 September 2025.

Building and Construction Industry Training Fund Authority, dated 11 September 2025.

Canberra Health Services, dated 3 October 2025.

Chief Minister Treasury and Economic Development Directorate (Volumes 1, 2.1 and 2.2), dated 25 September 2025.

City Renewal Authority, dated 23 September 2025.

Community Services Directorate, dated 13 August 2025

Cultural Facilities Corporation, dated 29 September 2025.

Director of Public Prosecutions, dated 3 October 2025.

Education Directorate, dated 1 October 2025.

Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, dated 1 October 2025.

Icon Water Limited, dated 9 October 2025.

Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission, dated 29 August 2025.

Infrastructure Canberra, dated 23 September 2025.

Justice and Community Safety Directorate, dated 4 September 2025.

Legal Aid Commission (ACT), 22 September 2025.

Long Service Leave Authority, dated 25 September 2025.

Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, dated 26 August 2025.

Office of the Work Health and Safety Commissioner (WorkSafe ACT), dated 11 September 2025.

Public Trustee and Guardian, dated 22 September 2025.

State of the Service, dated 25 September 2025.

Suburban Land Agency, dated 24 September 2025.

Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate, dated 1 October 2025.

Auditor-General Act—Auditor-General’s Report No 3/2025—ACT Government long-term plans and strategies—Government response, dated October 2025.

Estimates 2025-2026—Select Committee—Establishment—Assembly Resolution of 15 May 2025—Government response, dated October 2025.

Planning Act, pursuant to section 77—Planning (Holt) Major Plan Amendment 2025—Notifiable Instrument NI2025-567, dated 14 October 2025.

SDN Bluebell Childcare Centre and not-for-profit early learning sector—Support—Assembly Resolution of 24 September 2025 -Part A—Government response, dated 21 October 2025.

Subordinate legislation (including explanatory statements unless otherwise stated)

Legislation Act, pursuant to section 64—

ACT Teacher Quality Institute Act and Financial Management Act—

ACT Teacher Quality Institute Board Appointment 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-264 (LR, 7 October 2025).

ACT Teacher Quality Institute Board Appointment 2025 (No 2)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-265 (LR, 7 October 2025).

ACT Teacher Quality Institute Board Appointment 2025 (No 4)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-266 (LR, 7 October 2025).

Canberra Institute of Technology Act and Financial Management Act—Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT Board Deputy Chair) Appointment 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-262 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Cultural Facilities Corporation Act—Cultural Facilities Corporation (Designated Location) Declaration 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-253 (LR, 22 September 2025).

Energy Efficiency (Cost of Living) Improvement Act—

Energy Efficiency (Cost of Living) Improvement (Energy Savings Contribution) Determination 2025, including a regulatory impact statement—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-259 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Energy Efficiency (Cost of Living) Improvement (Energy Savings Target) Determination 2025, including a regulatory impact statement—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-258 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Energy Efficiency (Cost of Living) Improvement (Penalties for Noncompliance) Determination 2025, including a regulatory impact statement—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-260 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Energy Efficiency (Cost of Living) Improvement (Priority Household Target) Determination 2025, including a regulatory impact statement—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-261 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Fisheries Act—Fisheries (Fishing Gear) Declaration 2025, including a regulatory impact statement—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-252 (LR, 22 September 2025).

Motor Accident Injuries Act—

Motor Accident Injuries (Authorised IME Provider) Guidelines 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-256 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Motor Accident Injuries (Business Plan) Guidelines 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-257 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Motor Accident Injuries (Premiums) Guidelines 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-255 (LR, 29 September 2025).

Road Transport (General) Act—

Road Transport (General) Pay Parking Area Fees Determination 2025 (No 3)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-263 (LR, 2 October 2025).

Road Transport (General) Vehicle Registration and Related Fees Determination 2025 (No 3)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-254 (LR, 25 September 2025).

Urban Forest Act—

Urban Forest (Tree Advisory Panel) Appointment 2025 (No 1)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-267 (LR, 2 October 2025).

Urban Forest (Tree Advisory Panel) Appointment 2025 (No 2)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-268 (LR, 2 October 2025).

Urban Forest (Tree Advisory Panel) Appointment 2025 (No 3)—Disallowable Instrument DI2025-269 (LR, 2 October 2025).

Drugs of dependence—decriminalisation

MR HANSON (Murrumbidgee) (3.07): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) the Government’s decriminalisation of hard drugs came into effect in October 2023;
- (b) substantial increases in hard drug consumption in the ACT have been reported since that change by the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program;
- (c) cocaine use has increased by approximately 70 percent, heroin use has increased 30 percent and methamphetamine use has increased by 40 percent according to the program;
- (d) Canberra has the highest rate of drug overdoses according to the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre’s “Australian drug trends 2025: Key findings from the National Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) interviews” report;
- (e) 16 suspected drug overdose deaths have been reported in 2025 till September;
- (f) drug driving charges have increased to 423 for 1 January to 20 September 2025 alone, which is an over 20 percent increase from 347 in 2022-2023;
- (g) more than a quarter of ACT drug drivers tested positive for cocaine between 1 January and 20 September 2025;
- (h) drug related presentations at public emergency departments in the ACT have increased to 1,166 in 2024-2025;
- (i) when hard drugs were decriminalised in the ACT, Government Ministers

claimed that because police would no longer be prosecuting users, extra resources could be allocated to targeting, apprehending and prosecuting drug dealers; and

(j) deal and supply drug offences reported has in fact fallen by over half, from 85 in 2020-2021 to only 36 in 2024-2025;

(2) further notes that:

(a) the use of hard drugs has substantially increased, not reduced, since these drug law changes;

(b) the reporting of drug dealers has nearly halved, not increased, since these drug law changes despite an increase in drug use;

(c) a substantial increase in public drug related disorder has been observed in Canberra Civic, with reports of individuals shooting up with needles out in the open; and

(d) these changes have been a legal, social and policy failure on every measure the Government set when introducing these laws; and

(3) calls on the Government to repeal these dangerous changes to drug laws before more harm is done in our community.

There is no doubt that hard drugs like heroin and meth are hurting Canberrans and we should be doing all that we can to make sure that less people are using those drugs, dealing those drugs and dying from those drugs. However, since this government decriminalised hard drugs in 2023, the evidence is—because I know the Greens love everything to be evidence-based—drug usage has gone up significantly, drug overdoses have gone up, drug-driving charges have gone up, drug emergency department presentations have gone up and drug deaths are at an unacceptably high level.

These reforms have not only failed Canberrans but they have failed their own tests. We were told if we made these changes drugs would be dealt with as a health problem but being addicted to heroin, or meth, or cocaine is good for nobody's health and as we can see, emergency department presentations are increasing, not decreasing. These changes have exacerbated the health problem. The reality is it is hurting our community. We need to repeal these dangerous laws before more harm is done in our community and I will outline why that is the case.

In October 2023 the ACT became the first, and still the only, jurisdiction to decriminalise the possession of hard drugs like heroin, meth and cocaine. Personal possession of hard drugs was to be met with a caution, \$100 fine or a referral to a diversion program. We were told that going soft on drugs was going to solve a myriad of problems. The minister said that right now police were locking people up for taking hard drugs and they were throwing away the key.

Minister Pettersson talked about the need for healthcare, not handcuffs. Minister Stephen-Smith in August 2022 said these changes would enable:

...police to focus on the real criminals—those that cause so much harm to our community and families, those people who deal in or traffic drugs in our community.

And she said: “We know that treating drug use as a health issue rather than a criminal

one is not only reducing harm for those individuals who use drugs but ultimately ends up in building a safer community.”

We were promised the world if we decriminalised drugs. We were promised a safer community but since those reforms were introduced drug use in Canberra has surged. The National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program provides clear evidence of this, with the most recent report published in August. These figures track estimated consumption of illicit drugs by dose per 1,000 people per day. Now, October 2023 is a datapoint in these graphs so they do not provide exact figures but the trend is very clear. Cocaine consumption has increased by about 70 per cent since these reforms were introduced. Heroin use is up by 30 per cent and meth use has increased by 40 per cent. Certainly for the cocaine and the meth use, that is massively beyond the national figures, and for heroin, we have a consumption rate that is well beyond the national average.

We see similar results in the illicit drug reporting system which surveys drug users. In this document use of certain drugs in respondents’ past six months is recorded for each jurisdiction’s capital city. In Canberra we have seen cocaine use almost double since 2023 and now we have the equal highest use of heroin in the country, a cause of deep concern. Canberra has the highest level of drug overdoses in the country since these reforms. More people are dying. Thirty per cent of respondents have reported having a drug overdose in the past six months. More drug users, more overdoses, more reports to—indeed, more drug driving. It is clear that drug use is on the rise since these reforms were introduced, massively increasing drug use, certainly in comparison to national trends. We have seen 16 suspected drug overdose deaths in the ACT so far from the beginning of the year to September.

With the increase in usage and overdoses we are also seeing an impact on our already very busy emergency departments. Drug-related ED presentations have increased to 1,166. That is up 13 per cent since these reforms were introduced. That is people reporting with drug-induced, life-threatening conditions. That is bad for those individuals but you can also understand the additional strain and trauma that is causing our hard-working nurses and doctors. Drug decriminalisation has certainly made it a health issue. More health tragedy in our emergency departments, more usage, more people addicted to drugs, more overdoses. More people addicted to meth and heroin is not a good health outcome. That is not harm minimisation.

The safety of our community is being compromised by these reforms. We have seen what is unfolding in Civic, and I will quote from an article in *Region Canberra*, on 16 February this year that addresses the topic. A Civic business owner is quoted as saying about this antisocial behaviour:

It has definitely got worse...there’s a lot more people and they seem to be more aggressive.

You only need to go down to Civic to see that. We have had questions about that in the Assembly. Do not turn a blind eye to what is going on, members. They talk about the confronting issue of hard drugs, talk about an individual who:

began yelling at customers, ripping his shirt off, running out in front of traffic – he even got hit by a car over the Christmas break – and shooting up with needles out in the open.

This is just one of the anecdotes. Take a trip down to Civic, to Garema Place and places like that. We have had questions in the Assembly, as I have said.

Then there is the issue of drug-driving charges, 423 drug-driving charges have been reported by police from 1 January to September 2025 alone. For the entire period of 2022-23, 347 charges were reported. So we have seen a 20 per cent increase in just nine months compared to the 12 months before these reforms were introduced. So if that trend continues, and no doubt it will, we are going to see a 30 or 40 per cent increase or something like that. More people driving on our roads affected by drugs. How is that harm minimisation?

There was a *Canberra Times* article addressing this on 16 October this year. It was called, “New data shows the scale of coked-up driving in the capital after roadside testing changes.” If you increase drug use because of your reforms by 70 per cent, you are going to get more people driving affected by drugs, are you not? Seventy per cent increase in cocaine use will lead to more people driving under the influence of drugs.

It is also worth noting that deal and supply offences reported have decreased (appendix 3 of this year’s annual report for ACT Policing). In the 2020-21 period there were 85 reported offences for deal and supply, but this year that is halved to 36. So despite the fact that we have that increase in drug use, that reporting suggests that there is a lot less activity, and certainly that is in my conversations with the AFPA, of detectives out there targeting the drug dealers. The minister told us it would free up resources so they could target the drug dealers. That is not happening. As she said in the article, when it was criminalised we were told:

...the ACT government said the changes would free up police resources to better target big fish.

And that it would “enable police to focus on real criminals.” But the advice I am getting from the AFPA is that is not happening.

Before we decriminalised hard drugs, the rhetoric we were hearing from the government made it sound like people were being thrown in jail. Everyone was being locked up. If you used drugs in this town—everyone was being locked up. But Minister Stephen-Smith’s office confirmed in October 2022 in an email that only eight people were charged and convicted of illicit drug possession as a standalone offence in the 2021-22 financial year.

As Tom McLuckie, who has firsthand experience of the tragedy that can be caused by people driving with drugs on the road, said:

We have had more increases in deaths due to overdoses than the whole [eight] persons the year previous who were being ‘criminalised’ by being charged and convicted with drug possession offences.

There is no evidence that any of those eight actually ended up going to jail, but it served as a very effective deterrent. Now, that is eight cases where people were criminalised but that has led to hundreds more using drugs. Kids out there using meth and using heroin, overdosing on drugs, dying from drugs, going to the emergency department on

drugs, and driving under the influence of drugs. So how is that a harm minimisation approach? These laws have made our community less safe.

We understand that there is a review being undertaken but the evidence is there. Evidence-based. We have seen the evidence. I do not want to wait for more people to die, for more people out there on our roads to be drug driving, to be presenting to ED. I do not want to see more of our kids being addicted to meth. It is also true that when you look at a number of the people involved in the review—and we have done our research, we have looked at the individuals conducting the review, and the organisations—most of them are calling for drug legalisation or saying that needs to be an option.

What I fear, members—can I hear a “hear, hear?” Did I hear a “hear, hear?” So there you have it, Mr Assistant Speaker, there you have it! That is the evidence that what this review is meant to do is come back and say, “Let’s legalise drugs.” And when you hear a “hear, hear” from over in the Greens, that is the agenda playing out here. They do not care about the increase in meth. They do not care about the increase in heroin, the trauma, people dying. They are laughing. They think it is a great joke. They think it is a great joke, do they not?

Ms Clay: Point of order. I am so sorry to interject, but Mr Hanson just attributed a comment to the Greens that was made by Mr Emerson, and we are not really sure which of us was insulted by it, but it is just not right.

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: It would help if you withdraw it.

MR HANSON: Fair enough. I think the Greens share that sentiment, it would be fair to say. But if Mr Emerson’s view is we should be legalising drugs in the face of this evidence, “Hear, Hear. Let’s legalise meth, let’s legalise heroin,” that is an interesting revelation. That is what this agenda is about. We knew from when they started this process that regardless of what the evidence says—the deaths, the drug driving, the ED presentations, the increase in people using meth and heroin—what they want is a review that comes back and says, “Forget all that. Forget about the death and the trauma. Let’s take the next step and make the situation even worse.” I raise the issue that this is potentially, potentially a stitched-up review that is going to come back and say it is about legalisation. What do we get? “Hear, hear.” That is what we hear from those opposite. Pretty extraordinary on the crossbench.

So my motion is pretty clear. Hard drugs are hurting Canberra and the reforms that have been introduced have made matters worse on every single measure, on every single measure. The evidence is there. It is quite clear what has happened. Cocaine use has increased 70 per cent. Heroin is up 30 per cent. Meth is up 40 per cent. Drug overdoses are increasing, drug deaths are increasing, drug-driving charges have increased significantly. We have seen drug disorder. Go down to Civic and have a look at what is going on.

Drug emergency department presentations are increasing, but we have not seen the corresponding action against drug dealers, and clearly, if you have massive amounts of more drugs going on, the drug dealers are doing pretty well. Under this regime, the only people that are winning are the drug dealers. They are doing very nicely, very nicely

under these reforms, indeed. So I say to you, look at the evidence. The Greens and others, they always say, got to be evidence-based. Have a look at the evidence. This is a failed experiment. This is a failed experiment. It is not evidence-based, it is ideologically-based reform. What we hear, before we have even seen the review, Mr Emerson is cheering, cheering for those—

Mr Emerson: Point of order. Point of order. I did not say, “Hear, hear.” Thank you, Mr Assistant Speaker.

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: Do you withdraw that?

MR HANSON: I think when I say that the review is likely to result in a call for legalisation and a member shouts out, “Hear, hear.” I think I am entitled to debate, to then reflect that.

Mr Emerson: I did not say, “Hear, hear,” Mr Assistant Speaker.

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: I did not hear it.

Mr Emerson: I did not say, “Hear, hear.”

MR HANSON: Okay. Anyway, members, I commend my motion to the Assembly.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (3.22): I struggle to thank Mr Hanson for bringing this motion to the Assembly. It will not surprise anybody that the government will not be supporting Mr Hanson’s motion.

I would say to Mr Hanson that if you want to talk about evidence-based policy, cherry-picking data is not evidence. This is very clearly the entire basis of Mr Hanson’s argument: a series of data cherry-picks that do not hold up to any scrutiny whatsoever.

I would like to start the substance of my contribution today, Mr Assistant Speaker, by quoting ACT Policing. This was a very sad occurrence. Almost a year ago today, on 26 October 2024, police issued a statement after the 20th overdose death that we had seen in 2024. A young man was found unresponsive in a residence, and despite the efforts of emergency services he was declared deceased at the scene. The information collected by police indicated that the man had consumed non-prescription drugs immediately prior to his death.

Now, police pointed to the high purity levels of drugs that were available in the community, and the addition of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and nitazene we were seeing in the community. I would point out, of course, that fentanyl is not among the drugs that were decriminalised, or subject to a simple drug offence notice, as a result of the Drugs of Dependence Amendment Act. And the police specifically pointed to the use of these dangerous synthetic opioids and high purity heroin as carrying a significant risk to the community.

But Mr Assistant Speaker, policing went on to say, and I quote:

ACT Policing acknowledges drug addiction as a health issue and is continuing to urge those who are using drugs, particularly heroin, to consider the threat to their lives that might arise from doing so. Drugs can be tested at CanTEST, which provides free and confidential chemical analysis of pills and drugs intended for personal use, as well as tailored information and harm reduction advice.

I would like to acknowledge the support of ACT Policing in this harm reduction effort. The engagement between ACT Policing and the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy through the implementation of the drug law reform changes has, I think, had a really significant cultural impact on policing.

Of course, we agree that personal possession and use of drugs is a health issue not a criminal one. How Mr Hanson imagines that any of the individuals about whom he has spoken would be helped by being arrested, taken to the watch house, possibly put on remand in the Alexander Maconochie Centre, and then potentially never actually prosecuted. Mr Hanson has drawn heavily on the eight people charged and prosecuted, but “charged and prosecuted” is not a definition of engagement with the criminal justice system. That causes people significant harm and trauma—often people whose use of drugs in the first place is a result of the harm and trauma that they have experienced in their lives.

Mr Hanson also does not acknowledge that the wastewater measurement that he is relying on—I will get to the dates in a minute—does not actually tell you how many people are using illicit drugs. Policing have pointed to the increased purity of heroin that they are seeing, and increased range of opioids that they are seeing in the community. What wastewater testing data does is tell you about the amount of consumption, not how many people are using.

In that frame, Mr Hanson, of course, chooses October 2023 as the timeline because that is when the drug law reform changes came into effect. Of course, what we saw are two things we can point to, and I will focus particularly on cocaine because Mr Hanson has used that as an example. In the year before October 2023, the year before the law report came into effect, we also saw a really significant increase in cocaine use. Why, Mr Assistant Speaker? Because cocaine use plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic. It plummeted, and it is now back up to the rate per thousand people that it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is in fact below the rate it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of course, comparatively cocaine is one of the few drugs for which the ACT use is higher than other capital cities. But Region, in reporting on the wastewater report that Mr Hanson has used, indicated, and I will quote from Region Media—and I will just check, yes, this is 18 August 2025: “One of the most notable increases has been Australia’s growing use of cocaine. In June, the country was named the world’s biggest user of the drug per capita by a UN report.”

So, jurisdictions that have taken a tough-on-crime, tough-on-drugs approach—and the ACT—are all experiencing the same challenge with cocaine that it has become, to quote from Region again, “increasingly popular in recent years”.

Of course, New South Wales is, again, to quote, “the world’s leader in consumption of cocaine”. According to the UN. It saw the lowest percentage increase from 2023 to

2024, but from a higher base. And the Northern Territory, again, which did not introduce these laws—as Mr Hanson has said, we are the only jurisdiction that has done so—reported staggering 222 per cent jump in the use of cocaine over the same period that Mr Hanson is referring to.

So, cherry-picking of data to make his Chicken Little sky-is-going-to-fall argument is not something that comes as any surprise to us from Mr Hanson. We are used to it.

Mr Hanson also talked about the impact on drug driving. As I interjected while he was speaking, there was a clue even in the quote that he used to explain what had caused this.

The quote that Mr Hanson included in relation to the increase in positive drug driving results included the words "after roadside testing changes". We have always said, Mr Speaker, that part of the work that we would do in harm minimisation—which has three pillars: harm reduction, supply reduction and demand reduction—would be to ensure that drug driving was taken very seriously. We continue to work to ensure that drug driving is indeed done so.

Part of that has been an introduction of roadside drug testing for cocaine, which did not used to be the case. So those are the changes that Mr Hanson's own quote was referring to. It is hardly surprising that when you introduce a new roadside test that did not exist before, and you put an emphasis on enforcement around drug driving, that you see an increase in the number of people who are identified and caught drug driving. This is of course something that causes harm in the community and that the ACT government takes very, very seriously—just as we take very seriously, of course, the harm that is associated with drug use.

Mr Hanson talks about the harm in terms of emergency department presentations; in terms of deaths, and life impacts. But what we know is that friends and families of people who have died, friends and families for drug law reform, support drug law reform because they know that often part of the reason that they have lost loved ones is that people were too scared to get help. They were too scared to get help for their dependants or they were too scared to get help when something went wrong, because they were worried about the criminal consequences of calling an ambulance, of getting help for an overdose, or even for getting help for an addiction—because they were worried about the consequences of it.

So, Mr Hanson wants to take us back to a world where we criminalise people who are subject to drug dependence, or indeed those who use drugs recreationally—young people who experiment with MDMA and whose friends now can be confident in the ACT that they can call an ambulance. We send a message saying, "Get your drugs checked and if something goes wrong, for goodness sake get help."

What we see in the ACT under decriminalisation—and of course not something that Mr Hanson has focused on because MDMA use in the ACT is actually significantly below the national average and significantly below what it was in pre-pandemic times—heroin use is actually relatively stable across the pre-pandemic to post-pandemic period.

Mr Hanson claimed during the debate on the legislation that methamphetamine use was

going to skyrocket. Methamphetamine use continues to be below the national average, the capital city average, and the regional average for Australia, and lower than it was in 2019-20.

Mr Assistant Speaker, I said before that harm minimisation has three pillars and that one of those is supply reduction. Mr Hanson, again, has cherry picked some data in relation to policing's work in this space. So, I think it is important to put on the record that in this year to date, more than 1200 kilograms of illicit substances have been removed from the community across 866 seizures. Apprehensions of individuals by ACT Policing for supply and trafficking of illicit drugs has increased from 52 in 2022, to 70 in 2024. The number of individuals charged by ACT Policing for supplying, trafficking illicit drugs is actually very similar, so far, in 2025 to what it was in 2022.

It was lower in 2024. So, 2022: 446 charges. 2024: 245 charges. Mr Hanson is right. That is lower.

We have now seen an uptick to 423 so far in 2025. So, again, Mr Hanson is choosing a point in time that suits him and ignoring the wider context of the data he is choosing to use.

Mr Speaker, we can all agree that our ultimate aim is to reduce and minimise the harm associated with drug use across the territory. We know from a lot of evidence around the world that criminalising users of drugs, and criminalising people for personal possession is not an effective way of reducing harm. We also know that the Canberra community supports this view; that the majority of Canberrans believe that drug use, and personal possession for personal use, should be treated as a health issue not a criminal one. We are with the majority of Canberrans.

MS BARRY (Ginninderra) (3.37): I rise to speak in support of Mr Hanson's motion, and I thank him for bringing this motion before the Assembly today. It is no surprise that I will be supporting Mr Hanson's motion today, because in my role as shadow minister for youth, and as a mother with a very active teenage daughter, I am fortunate to be able to speak regularly with young people and those involved in youth work. This has given me great insight into the impacts of the Labor-Greens policies of decriminalising of drugs on young people.

I have to say that the stories I have heard, both from my daughter and from the community, are distressing and disappointing. I will talk today about some of those consequences. I appreciate that some of the examples I will give today will be triggering, because hearing them firsthand was certainly confronting for me and for my team. In the interests of protecting those who might be triggered by such discussions, I will try to keep the details broad and depersonalised, and I will try to avoid the use of emotive language.

Firstly, I want to talk about the disconnect between Labor's message that everything is fine and under control, and the context of this motion, in that there are significant and worsening problems of drug use amongst young people—children—and the recruitment of young people by organised criminal gangs. Both of these stories cannot be true.

The message that I hear consistently and constantly from community groups, youth advocates and multicultural communities, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, is that things are most definitely not okay. I have been told harrowing stories of young people—in some cases as young as 10 years of age—using hard drugs in the ACT. I have been told about young people coming to the attention of police or youth workers while engaging in risky behaviour associated with drug use. I have heard of young people suffering permanent injuries because of risky behaviours associated with drugs, in some cases causing others to be injured or killed.

It is of particular concern to stakeholders that we do not currently collect data on young people who are on drugs who then go on to attempt to commit suicide. It begs the comment: if you do not know what the issue is or you do not know about the issue, how do you fix it?

I have heard credible reports from multiple sources that organised crime, including outlaw motorcycle gangs, are actively recruiting children—mostly, children from disadvantaged backgrounds—as young as 10 years old to traffic or sell hardcore drugs. I have heard that organised crime groups refer to Canberra as the “party capital” because of our lax law enforcement. I have been told that, in one instance, police stopped a young person who was driving a stolen car under the influence of drugs, and all they could do was say to the young person words to this effect: “Can I please have the car keys, and can I please take you home?”

Some people may ask: how does criminalising drugs help in this instance? First of all, it sends a signal to the community that what that young person is doing is wrong. But even in the ACT, prior to decriminalising drugs, we did not lock children up and throw the keys away. What criminalising drugs could have done in that instance is give the police who attended the authority, the legal support, to ensure that that child gets the programs that they need, gets referred to the wraparound services that they need, and is compelled to attend those programs.

Labor will probably say that there is no evidence for these concerns, and that this is just a Liberal beat-up. But I am hearing these concerns from too many different sources—from parents, young people, community organisations, police, and people within the youth protection system. I hear the same stories regularly and consistently. I would say to my colleagues opposite: if you are not hearing these concerns, too, you are definitely not listening.

I agree that there is no empirical evidence, which might be found through police prosecutions or court action. That is hardly a surprise, given how the Labor government has undermined the very system that could have given us information by decriminalising these matters. It is no surprise that, if you are not counting, and you are wedded to an ideological position, you are not seeing the evidence.

As the old saying goes, there is no smoke without fire. Given the risks fall hardest on our youngest and most vulnerable, and, most times, our most disadvantaged, surely, it is time to take serious action.

My conclusion is that Mr Hanson is right to be concerned about the impact of drugs on our young people. I say to my Labor colleagues opposite that it is time they faced the

facts and recognised that their decriminalisation program is not working. Why? Because, unlike Portugal, which you referenced as a successful case study, you did not “heavily invest” in the structures and services needed to mitigate the unintended consequences. This will signal to young people that drugs are okay, and that they can use it and get away with it. And they can get away with anything.

I would also like to reflect on why re-criminalisation of drugs is important. This is not, as Labor might like to characterise this motion, calling on Labor to lock kids up. We recognise that putting young children into prison will not fix the problem. Indeed, we recognise that such a strategy would only make the situation worse. However, I believe that our response to youth crime does need an appropriate balance between the carrot and the stick.

I have heard reports from police and youth workers that young people are being increasingly drawn to drug culture and its associated disrespect for community. Mr Hanson highlighted that beautifully in his speech. Children are increasingly avoiding the consequences of their actions and just walking out of the therapeutic support that they are provided with.

I have heard reports that Labor’s Therapeutic Support Panel members are increasingly frustrated at the lack of options available to them to address increased youth crime, drug addiction and antisocial behaviour as a result of drug use. I have heard reports from youth service providers of desperate calls from the Therapeutic Support Panel, seeking options that Labor has either never funded or has recently defunded.

This cycle of weak community responses is leading to an increase in gang cultures and disrespect for the property and livelihoods of others. I believe that re-criminalisation of drugs would give us a chance to address the organised crime groups running the drug trade. Re-criminalising drugs would compel us to look at the settings and penalties. It would also serve as a general deterrent, because I believe strongly in punishment and asset confiscation for organised crime groups.

I would support stiff penalties for people inciting young people into trafficking or selling of drugs. Those who seek to corrupt young and vulnerable minds for personal gain are among the most reprehensible in our community. I see less value in criminal prosecution and sentencing for those addicted to drugs and consider that the only value in retaining an offence for users is that it enables courts to make enforceable orders requiring addicts to attend rehabilitation programs.

I consider that much of our response to addicts should be a focus on their health and wellbeing, with counselling and therapeutic supports being key. It would give our youth workers providing therapeutic supports the tools they need to address the individual’s addictions and the subversive subcultures associated with drugs.

Finally, I would like to say that none of this is a surprise. The Canberra Liberals opposed decriminalisation of drugs and asked that the change in implementation of the rise in the age of criminal responsibility be delayed until we could be satisfied that the appropriate therapeutic supports could be put in place, and that we could be assured that raising the age of criminal responsibility would not place our young people at risk of exploitation. Sadly, the evidence is now emerging of the horrific and horrendous

consequences of a Labor-Greens ideologically driven agenda of decriminalising drugs.

Let us make no mistake about it: for young people, decriminalising drugs is not harm minimisation; this is harm extension, because there is nothing minimal about harm done to a year 4 child taking fentanyl.

I thank Mr Hanson for bringing this matter to the attention of the Assembly, and I call on the Assembly to act to save our children from the consequences of this very poorly delivered decision. For this government, the choice for a child in year 4 is between fentanyl and Facebook. That is the society we are building for them.

MS MORRIS (Brindabella) (3.47): I want Canberra to be a place where all Canberrans can be prosperous, safe and free, and that is why I rise to speak in favour of Mr Hanson's motion. I do so by looking at the implications of decriminalisation for those portfolios for which I am responsible as shadow minister, all of which overwhelmingly go to public safety.

Our police are being asked to do their job with their hands tied behind their back. Decriminalisation came into effect in October 2023, at the beginning of the 2023-24 financial year. If we look at proceedings against offenders—charges laid by police—for drug-related offences, we see the failure of decriminalisation. Yes, offences for possessing and using drugs fell from 313 in 2022-23 to 305 in 2023-24 and 240 in 2024-25. Reported offences for dealing in and supplying drugs have also fallen.

Police report that possession offences have fallen not because drug use has fallen, but because enforcement is more uncertain under the new framework. The evidence which Mr Hanson has summarised shows that drug use in the territory has increased greatly. The underlying criminal activity on the supply side must have increased dramatically, despite the fall in reported offences.

ACT Policing has been effective in proceeding to prosecution. Charges for manufacturing and growing drugs have increased from 12 in 2022-23 to 15 in 2023-24 and 16 in 2024-25. Charges for dealing in and supplying drugs have doubled, and this continued to increase in the last financial year. Meanwhile, drug driving charges, which were falling in the 2020s, have now increased from 241 in 2023-24 to 338 in 2024-25, which is an increase of 40 per cent.

Drugs feed into other forms of crime. The connection between drug use and wider criminal behaviour is constantly before us. The attempt by this government to normalise drug use is fertile ground for organised crime and is a factor in the increased presence of outlaw motorcycle gangs here in the ACT. We have outlaw bikie gang members describing Canberra as a safe haven, a place where they can conduct their illicit affairs under the nose of this government, and taking pride in that because they know that nothing will be done.

Decriminalisation has done little to deter use. Instead, it has sent the message to organised crime that hard drugs are not taken seriously by the ACT justice system. Federal and state experts have warned that these are the most radical drug laws in the world—not in Australia, in the world—and they risk encouraging criminal networks to expand their supply while demand grows—and, as we have all seen and heard today,

demand is growing.

All of this, naturally, weighs very heavily on police resources and police officer morale. Officers are affected by the increased workload. They are placed in danger and are often injured by drug-fuelled criminals. So often, they are the first responders to the devastating effects of drug use in road accidents, overdoses and violence. This harm is, of course, more widely felt by other first responders—our ambulance officers and firefighters.

A particular area of crime where illegal drugs figure prominently is family and domestic violence, and this cannot be overlooked or ignored. The connection between family and domestic violence and drug use is well established in research and obvious to anyone who seeks to reduce the incidence and impact of violence in the home. Drugs are undoubtedly a significant factor in dysfunctional and violent families. Australian research published in 2019 by Kerri Coomber and others showed that “respondents who reported having used any illicit drug in the past 12 months, with or without alcohol use, had over three times the odds of experiencing any violence in the past 12 months”. Furthermore, drug involvement in family and domestic violence “was significantly more likely than any other violent incident types”.

The harm of illegal drugs extends further into families, with significantly higher levels of mental illness associated with the use of drugs such as methamphetamines, ecstasy and cocaine. The relationship between drugs and mental illness is complex, but no-one would deny that drugs contribute to the significant mental health problems in Australian families.

The connections between drug use, mental ill-health, family dysfunction and crime, including organised crime, come to a head in the Alexander Maconochie Centre, where pre-sentencing mental health problems are widespread among inmates and where drug dependence among so many of the inmates creates a constant problem, with drugs being brought into the facility and being made available to inmates.

The legacy of drug use, which was a significant part of the criminal life which brought them into the AMC in the first place, is now a significant obstacle to their rehabilitation in the AMC and, in many instances, means they will reoffend when they are finally released. So we go round in circles, failing to break a cycle of crime, family dysfunction and drugs.

That failure is shown in the data on offences against the person. According to ACT Policing’s recent annual report, offences against the person per 100,000 people have increased from 802 in 2021-22 to 895 in 2024-25, a 12 per cent increase per head of population in just three years. I have not even touched on the broader fallout across communities, with hard drugs driving financial hardship, homelessness, social instability and public disorder.

There is a reason why, according to a recent Roy Morgan poll, people in Canberra overwhelmingly feel less safe. Violent crime is going up. It would be naive not to recognise the role that increased drug use has played in that. The message is clear. The dangerous changes to drug laws in 2023 need to be repealed, and I commend this motion to the Assembly.

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (3.55): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter today. As I think will be anticipated by members of the chamber, the Greens will not be supporting this motion, and we will continue to stand against the shameful rhetoric that it employs in its attempt to demonise people who use drugs. I thank the minister for providing some of the comments that she made, and I will certainly be adding to the basis of evidence against this motion and underlining why it is the wrong direction to be going in.

Drug use is a health issue, and it should be treated as a health issue. People who use drugs should be supported to live well. Quite frankly, they deserve to be spoken about much better than Mr Hanson does in his motion today. These people are this community's mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. They are loved, and people worry about them and care for them.

We will always approach issues like these—issues that affect people's lives—not as a political football but with kindness and compassion. If “tough on drugs” worked, it would have worked by now. Punitive approaches do not reduce drug use, and they make the harms that may result from drug use more likely. It shames people out of seeking help when they need it.

I have long supported and championed the full suite of harm minimisation measures, including drug decriminalisation, permanent pill testing, needle and syringe programs and safe injecting rooms. As attorney, I expanded the Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List capacity and criteria so that people coming into contact with the criminal justice system by virtue of their drug and alcohol use could be diverted into treatment programs and away from custody.

We all know the social and financial benefits that this drug court has generated. On a personal level, whenever I speak to graduates of the drug court, I am reminded of how this approach works. One young man who I spoke with recently is in recovery, not offending—studying, working and providing for his young family, all things that could have been infinitely hard or impossible to do in custody, if his drug use had been treated not as a health issue but as a criminal issue.

Drug decriminalisation is not radical. It is sensible reform that means maximum penalties for possessing small amounts of some illegal drugs for personal use have been reduced. The reform diverts people who use drugs away from the criminal justice system and encourages them to access health services. If you are found with small quantities of drugs, you may be diverted to a health, education and information session or pay a \$100 fine.

I do not accept the premise of Mr Hanson's motion, which is that drug use has increased because of decriminalisation, for the very simple reason that there is no evidence to support that claim. Experts I have spoken to in the field in Canberra are of the view that it has not had an impact on drug-taking behaviour; rather, the impact is at the point where police are interacting with the person using drugs.

Decriminalisation has not resulted in a significant increase in people seeking treatment. Most people who do the health and education information session do not go into

treatment; they go on with their lives. Positively, most people are taking up this health option instead of paying the fine. For some people, it is the first time they have been able to have a conversation about their drug use.

Mr Hanson has taken studies and used them for purposes that are not the purposes for which they were intended. For example, he asserts there have been substantial increases in hard drug consumption in the ACT since decriminalisation reported by the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program. The reality is that this wastewater program cannot be used to determine an increase or decrease in the number of people using drugs, and the minister made this point. It can only measure the metabolites, and it cannot be used to say whether the same number of people are using more drugs, or fewer people are using more drugs. For example, if you detect 100 milligrams of cocaine, that could mean 100 people each used one milligram, or 10 people used 10 milligrams each. The wastewater program is not a tool that is used to measure how many people are using drugs.

Additionally, while report 24 of the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program showed increased wastewater detections of heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine in the ACT during the data collection period, the report acknowledges that this is a national increase and was recorded by all states and territories, influenced by changing drug markets. All states and territories saw this trend. None of the others have had the drug law changes that the ACT has had. The correlation that Mr Hanson has sought to draw is simply not established by the dataset that he is leaning on.

Mr Hanson incorrectly asserts that cocaine, methylamphetamine and heroin use has increased, according to the wastewater program. This is false, and I would encourage Mr Hanson to review not only the period of August 2023 to October 2024, but also the eight-year trends for Canberra, which are published online, and are therefore publicly available. He may be comforted to learn that cocaine metabolites from December 2023 to October 2024 are lower than the period of June to October 2020, so there is less detection of cocaine than occurred prior to the changes to the ACT's laws. Heroin metabolites in August 2023 to October 24 are equivalent or lower to those in June 2022 through to December 2022. Methamphetamine metabolites in August 2023 to October 2024 are lower than they were in 2019 and 2020, all before the drug law changes.

Mr Hanson's use of incorrect figures and misrepresentation of the data pushes a divisive narrative that is not based on the evidence and reveals more about the character and values of the motion and those pushing it than it does about the issue that it purports to advance.

Mr Hanson was very excited to assert that drug-related presentations at public emergency departments in the ACT have increased to 1,166 in 2024-25. In reality, all presentations, not just drug-related presentations, increased between 2023-24 and 2024-25. Further, these presentations capture all drug-related presentations and are not specific to the 11 illicit drugs subject to reduced personal possession penalties. The data captures a wide range of substances and circumstances. Once again we see a linkage that is actually not borne out by the dataset.

While there is no good time for a motion as factually incorrect and as inflammatory as this one, I do note that decriminalisation and the drugs of dependence reforms from

2023 are currently being evaluated by the University of New South Wales, and their report is due in the first half of next year. Mr Hanson did note this. I believe he has jumped the gun with his motion, but this may be because he considers this for the best. After all, why should he risk waiting for a report based on evidence, an actual evaluation, that might draw conclusions that are at odds with how he feels?

We are part-way through the evaluation, and we should wait until the evaluation is completed before jumping to any conclusions. What we have seen today is Mr Hanson starting to set it up. He talked about a stitched-up evaluation, and what we see from that is that he is already concerned that this detailed evaluation may not suit his narrative, so it is better to undermine it now than to wait until it comes out.

It would not be right to let this harmful assertion slide—that a substantial increase in public drug-related disorder has been observed in Canberra Civic, with reports of individuals “shooting up with needles out in the open”. That is what we have heard from Mr Hanson and his colleagues today. As one stakeholder said to me, if there are people injecting drugs in the open, this has nothing to do with decriminalisation. If people are at that stage in their lives with co-occurring social and health needs and they are using drugs in public, it is a social and economic problem, and they have been failed by this community.

The World Health Organisation says that people who use drugs are some of the most marginalised people in society. As an Assembly, we have an obligation to have conversations and implement policies that uplift this cohort, not to create division that further entrenches disadvantage or causes more trauma.

If you have ever cared about someone who uses drugs, and particularly what Mr Hanson calls hard drugs, you will be familiar with the gnawing worry, the sleepless nights, the tension between making and enforcing boundaries, not being able to control their choices, and wanting them to be as safe as possible. Family Drug Support ACT offer education to family members, friends and supporters of people who use drugs.

There are tremendous organisations staffed by professional, non-judgemental people doing valuable work in this space, including CAHMA, Directions, Gudan Gulwan, Hepatitis ACT, Karralika, Marymead, UnitingCare, the Salvos, Ted Noffs, Toora, Winnunga and ATODA. They all approach this difficult issue with the sort of care, compassion, reflection and thoughtfulness that it warrants.

Most importantly, I would like to reiterate to anyone following the proceedings today who does use drugs that Mr Hanson’s views do not reflect the views of the majority of the politicians in the ACT Assembly or, in my view, of Canberrans. Drug use is a health issue, and decriminalisation is vital to breaking down stigma and shame. The Canberra that I am proud to live in is understanding and supportive of people who are living with health issues, wants to minimise harm to you, and believes you are as worthy of health care as any one of us in this place.

On Monday, I will be at the 30th Annual Remembrance Ceremony in Yarralumla to hold space for people who have lost their lives to illicit drugs. As it has been in previous years, I am sure it will be a moving opportunity to be reminded of the real-world impact that drug policy has, and the importance of standing up against the incendiary speech

we have heard from Mr Hanson today and other people that offer that sort of perspective. We know that this is a complex issue and that the so-called “tough on drugs” approach has not worked. It is time that we seek a better and different approach. That is the position that the Greens support, and we will not be supporting Mr Hanson’s motion today.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (4.06): I thank Mr Hanson for bringing this motion before the Assembly today and for raising an important issue that, as has been discussed in every contribution, has wide-reaching implications for individuals in our community and for our community more broadly. However, I cannot accept Mr Hanson’s calls today, so I will be opposing this motion. We know criminalisation does not work. That is not up for debate, although we are indeed here debating it. The body of evidence to support this statement is enormous.

What we are discussing today is data from the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program which shows that there has been a perceived increase in drug use, but it does not tell us that decriminalisation does not work. It does not tell us why there has been an increase. We know, as other members have indicated, that across the country we have seen increases in drug use, which has been reported as being a result of drug markets returning after COVID-19. It does not tell us why people are taking drugs. We can only speculate. Without considering all the factors, using this data to tell the story that decriminalisation has directly led to increases in drug use is misleading and unhelpful.

Portugal often gets pointed to as an example of best-practice decriminalisation. In 2001, Portugal decriminalised all drugs and shifted the policy approach to consider the broader factors that lead to harm associated with drugs. They re-categorised drug use as a health issue rather than a criminal issue. By considering the whole picture, they were able to reduce all forms of harm associated with drug-taking.

The proportion of prisoners sentenced for drugs has fallen from 40 per cent to 15 per cent. They have the lowest drug-related death rates in Europe. Social cost has reduced by 18 per cent in the 11 years post reform. There is reduced pressure on their judicial system, less people in jail, and a significant reduction in hepatitis B and C. That is not to say that the reduction was immediate or total. There were periods when drug-related harm rates rose or fell significantly. But overall, long term, there has been an undeniable reduction in harm.

That is what we need to bear in mind here. We cannot fall into the trap of making decisions based on short timelines and tenuous correlations. The Australian Capital Territory harm reduction cost-benefit analysis, completed by the Australian National University and Burnet Institute in March this year, clearly shows the economic benefits over the long term of investing in harm reduction. It states:

Maintaining the current package of harm reduction interventions in the ACT was estimated to have a benefit-cost ratio of 10.8 compared to the counterfactual scenario with no interventions. This means that every dollar spent on the current package of harm reduction interventions leads to \$10.80 in societal economic benefits.

That is just maintaining the current package of harm reduction. Imagine what benefits—

the budgetary benefits, which should interest the Canberra Liberals as well—we could see if this was expanded. But I do not need to ask that question because the review has done it for us. The review states that, if we were to invest an additional \$16.1 million over 2026-30, it could lead to a further \$88 million reduction in health and social costs; or by investing an additional \$20.4 million over 2026-30, a \$103.9 million reduction in such costs.

I thank Mr Hanson for giving us the opportunity to discuss the harm caused by drugs of dependence across our community. But improved service provision is how we address those harms, not incarceration. The motion that is before us reflects on the tragedy of the 16 Canberrans whose lives have been lost this year due to suspected drug overdoses. It fails to explain how it would have been better if those Canberrans were considered to be committing a crime when they overdosed.

Earlier this year, I spoke to a parent who lost her daughter to a drug overdose. This happened before decriminalisation. The child was considered to be committing a criminal act in taking the drug that took her life. What her mother wished for was not for the ACT to be tougher on drugs. She did not wish for more daughters like hers to be criminalised. Instead, she wished more support had been available for her daughter when and where she needed it.

Organisations like the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy provide these kinds of support and save many lives in doing so, with more than 5,000 naloxone kits handed out since 2012. But we could be doing a lot more to distribute naloxone more widely and to train more Canberrans in its administration. Facilities like CanTEST provide best-practice drug-testing services to ensure that when people do take drugs, they do so in the safest way possible. That is the undercurrent of the motion that we are discussing. It is supposed to be about harm minimisation. Currently, we know that the opening hours for CanTEST limit who can access the service in large part to the cohort of recreational drug users. We could be expanding those hours.

Recent evidence shared at coronial inquests into deaths in custody has made clear that imprisoning people does not keep them from taking drugs; rather, we are seeing overdose deaths and rapidly spreading blood-borne diseases in prison. Since 2011, there have been conversations about the implementation of a needle and syringe program in the Alexander Maconochie Centre, but the government has refused to consider it.

Since 1999, we have had legislation in the ACT to establish a safe injecting room, the Supervised Injecting Place Trial Act 1999, which was introduced not by the Greens, or by Labor or some crazy leftie, but by an independent health minister, Michael Moore, under the last Liberal-led government. Professor Moore introduced the bill establishing this act, not for ideological reasons, but because he is a health expert—a health expert who is across the evidence. It is unfortunate that the provisions brought by this legislation have sat on the shelf for 26 years because we have not seen the investment needed to make a safe injecting room happen.

We need to ensure that these facilities and programs and the organisations that provide them are adequately funded, if we really are concerned about drug harm reduction in our community. If we are to see real results, we need to see investment in the whole story, from preventive program funding to the peer-led support services we need, to

proactive outreach programs for people experiencing mental illness combined with alcohol or drug dependency, to adequate resources to address the risk factors that lead to people taking drugs in unsafe situations.

This cannot be another example of siloed government policy. Decriminalisation must be accompanied by sufficient support services to fulfill the promise that we have heard a lot about today of treating drug use as a health matter. People do not use drugs because they are decriminalised or not use them because they are criminalised. There is always another reason why someone chooses to take drugs. Making it a criminal offence to do so does not change that reason. It leads to people taking drugs under circumstances that are less safe, creating more harm, and we as a community pay for the harm caused, just as they do as individuals.

It seems that a lot of Mr Hanson's concerns boil down not to personal drug use, but to the crimes committed by people while they are affected by drugs. Those crimes are criminalised. They remain criminalised. But it is the taking of the drugs themselves that we are supposed to be debating today—and that is not, and should not be, criminalised. I do think that is something for us to be proud of in the ACT. I applaud the government for their position today, while also calling for them to be real about the level of resourcing needed to make this policy a success over the long term.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (4.15): I rise to add my voice to this debate and let people know that I also see drug use as a health issue. I support services being made available to people who need them. I will therefore not be supporting Mr Hanson's motion, but I thank him for bringing it forward.

MR HANSON (Murrumbidgee) (4.15): At the outset I would like to thank Ms Morris and Ms Barry for speaking in support of my motion. I think they have raised some important and interesting points, and it is good to see that there are still those in the community who have the common sense to realise that this is flawed policy.

In terms of responding to some of the other comments, I will go to the Labor Party. There is a sense that there is callous disregard for people on drugs; that is certainly not the case. The concern that we have, and what we want to do, is to make sure that people are not getting on to drugs in the first place. When we look at the wastewater analysis and listen to what is going on out on the streets, we want to ensure that there are fewer people using meth and fewer people using heroin, because, at the end of the day, the best way to reduce harm is to have fewer people using drugs.

Before the laws came into effect, the reality was that there were only eight people charged and convicted in the year leading up. The previous Chief Police Officer told us in evidence is that because of the powers that he had he was able to effectively divert hundreds of people to rehab. He could get them to go with the threat of law court action. If you are a heroin addict or a meth addict, sometimes you need a bit of a kick to get you there. But, of course, if the only outcome is making a phone call or something to say that you have connected to rehab, or pay a \$100 fine, if you are a meth or a heroin addict, there is no real compulsion to go and completing those rehab courses effectively. What we are seeing at the moment—based on the advice of the previous Chief Police Officer—and what we are hearing, is that the people engaging in those services are not fully completing the courses, and they are having the results that perhaps we are used

to.

The minister says, “We take drug driving seriously.” I am glad that they do now. I remind the minister that a previous Labor Chief Minister, when the Liberals first introduced that legislation, said that it was a redneck policy. That was the view of the Labor Party back in 2005. And Mr Rattenbury, who is in this place, will remember that we had to drag the Labor Party, kicking and screaming, to introduce those laws.

As I said before in response to Mr Emerson’s concerns, my concern is for those kids who are out there getting addicted. Yes, there are people with addiction. We want to make sure that they get the care that they want—and I think that this reform has failed—is to stop people getting addicted in the first place. It is a complex, difficult issue; I am not trying to pretend it can be simple. There is no simple response to this, but having it criminalised is the lesser of the two, and it prevents people getting on drugs in the first place in a much greater way than decriminalisation has. And I think the evidence that I have outlined certainly shows that.

The term that has been coined is that “availability is the mother of addiction”. If you decriminalise you have more drugs on the streets, and that is where you will see addiction go up. I reject the assertion from the Greens and Mr Rattenbury that this is demonising drug users. We do not want people using drugs, and I have been quite open about that, because of the harm that it does. Using meth is not good for you. Take a trip down to Civic some nights, and if you think being on meth or heroin is a good outcome, you will see that it is not. In this place we have to do everything we can to make sure that young people in this city do not get addicted to those very harmful drugs. We need to respond when they are, but if we take away the measures for parents or for police, it makes it harder for that to happen.

Mr Rattenbury talked about the great success of the drug court. If you decriminalise, how does the drug court work? I may explore that a bit later, but if you say that the drug court is a great success because people are prosecuted, what happens if all those people are just paying the \$100 fine and never going to the court? We will have a bit of a chat about that.

The Labor Party and the Greens said that I was getting the wastewater results of the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program from the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, and that that is not the purpose of that. If you go to their website, you can see what it says about that.

Much of the harm Australians suffer at the hands of serious and organised crime is due to illicit drugs and the level of community harm increases in line with consumption.

Do you hear that? The level of community harm increases in line with consumption. So, when I say that the evidence from the wastewater analysis shows that consumption is up—all those levels and all those markers are up—this is what it says:

Since 2016, the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program has provided leading-edge, coordinated national research and intelligence on illicit drugs—and licit drugs that can be abused—with a specific focus on methylamphetamine and other high-risk substances.

Wastewater analysis is widely applied internationally as a tool to measure and interpret drug use within national populations. The ACIC's wastewater program gives us valuable insight into trends in drug consumption across Australia and can identify new sources of threat from serious and organised crime.

By analysing the findings of the program, government, law enforcement, health, education and community organisations can have informed national conversations about drug trends and develop targeted policies.

That is what I am using the data for. I think that is pretty accurate. As they say, the level of community harm increases in line with consumption. If we can keep consumption down, we are doing less harm. If consumption goes up, that is not a harm minimisation response.

It is also perhaps worth listening to what those on the front lines are saying. Listen to what the Australian Federal Police Association, which represents Australia's frontline police officers, is saying. They put out a press release today:

The Australian Federal Police Association (AFPA) welcomes and supports the motion introduced by ACT Shadow Attorney-General Jeremy Hanson MLA, calling for the repeal of the ACT Government's hard drug decriminalisation laws. AFPA President Alex Caruana said the statistics since the laws came into effect in October 2023 show a clear and concerning trends in increase in drug use, overdoses, and drug-related harm across the Territory.

"Frontline officers are seeing firsthand the devastating effects of these laws. Drug use in public places has become more visible, overdoses are increasing, and police resources are being stretched as drug-driving offences and community disorder rise."

This is not an assertion from me. This is our frontline police officers, and you lot opposite and on the crossbench are ignoring that evidence. The statement went on:

Mr Caruana said the AFPA supports evidence-based policies that reduce harm, but the ACT's approach has had the opposite effect.

"We support rehabilitation and treatment, but you cannot reduce harm by normalising or excusing the possession and use of highly addictive and dangerous substances. The community is paying the price for a failed experiment.

"We urge the ACT Government to listen to the evidence, listen to police, and repeal these laws before more Canberrans are hurt," Mr Caruana said.

The problem is that we have a body of people here who are always talking about evidence, but it is quite clear from today's debate, that they are more focused on the ideology, because the Australian criminal intelligence community says that usage increases harm. We have seen an increase in usage; that is the evidence. We are seeing it from the front line. Police officers are saying it is increasing harm out there in our community.

On every measure, drug usage is up. Drug driving is up. ED presentations are up.

Overdoses are up. At what stage are you going to understand or recognise and acknowledge that these reforms have not reduced harm? They have increased harm, and that is why I call on this government to repeal those laws. I commend my motion to the Assembly.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 6

Noes 13

Peter Cain
Jeremy Hanson
Elizabeth Lee
James Milligan
Deborah Morris
Mark Parton

Andrew Barr	Suzanne Orr
Yvette Berry	Michael Pettersson
Andrew Braddock	Shane Rattenbury
Fiona Carrick	Rachel Stephen-Smith
Jo Clay	Caitlin Tough
Thomas Emerson	Taimus Werner-Gibbings
Laura Nuttall	

Question resolved in the negative.

Leave of absence

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

That leave of absence be granted to Mr Steel for this sitting for personal reasons.

Workers compensation—gig economy

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (4.30): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) all workers deserve to be safe at work and have access to proper workers' compensation, including rehabilitation, if they are injured at work regardless of what industry they work in or how they are engaged to perform that work;
- (b) the gig economy, or the platform economy, has grown substantially over the last decade with over 100 platforms operating in Australia, the most common being in transport and food delivery, however it can cover anything from cleaning, disability support, and home maintenance. Slightly over one percent of employed people are engaged in digital platform work according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics;
- (c) gig work is characterised by engagement in short-term paid tasks performed through an online app matching supply and demand for the task. The work is often undertaken by vulnerable workers, including migrants and students, who have low bargaining power, low income by comparison to award wages, and limited employment conditions;
- (d) workers' compensation is compulsory for all employers for their workers, however working arrangements with digital platforms mean that a gig worker is generally not employed directly by the platform owner but is treated like an independent contractor;
- (e) the *Fair Work Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024* (Cwth)

amended the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cwth) to empower the Fair Work Commission to set minimum standards for “employee-like” workers, such as gig economy workers, however this does not extend to workplace health and safety coverage; and

(f) workplace health and safety legislation, including workers’ compensation, is the responsibility of each jurisdiction;

(2) further notes that:

(a) during the 2010s there was a harmonisation process across most jurisdictions for workplace health and safety, including the ACT. This expanded coverage of workplace health and safety laws beyond employees to include many contractors who worked for a “person conducting a business undertaking” (PCBU);

(b) Safe Work Australia has expressed that given the changes to the status of gig workers under the Fair Work Act, each jurisdiction should explore extending coverage of workers’ compensation to gig workers;

(c) workers’ compensation schemes vary significantly between jurisdictions however in 2023, Safe Work Australia members agreed to develop a national approach to workers’ compensation for gig workers although progress appears to be slow across the country; and

(d) Queensland began a process to extend workers’ compensation coverage to gig workers in 2023, including with legislative reform; and

(3) calls on the Government to:

(a) investigate the expansion of workers’ compensation to gig workers in the ACT through expanding the existing private sector scheme, creating a specific gig economy scheme, or another more suitable option to ensure gig workers are not disadvantaged compared to other private sector workers in the ACT;

(b) work with other jurisdictions to explore a consistent approach to the coverage of gig workers in each workers’ compensation scheme; and

(c) report back to the Assembly on progress by the last sitting week of 2026.

Everyone deserves to be safe at work. It does not matter what job a person does, what industry a person works in, or who a person works for, everyone should be safe. And when people are injured at work, they deserve to be protected, but a growing number of workers in Australia do not have these protections available to them. I am talking about gig workers.

The gig economy—also known as the digital platform economy, share economy or on-demand work—represents a growing segment of the workforce that operates through over 100 different digital platforms connecting individuals to short-term, flexible work opportunities. Here in Canberra, many of us rely on services provided by workers within the gig economy, who offer a broad spectrum of services, from ridesharing and food delivery to personal care, home maintenance and a range of other task-based or freelance jobs that cater to the immediate needs of consumers. Who in this chamber can say that they have never used a digital platform for a service, whether it be Uber, Uber Eats, Airtasker, DoorDash, or even delivery partners linked to supermarkets and other retailers?

Gig work can provide a vital source of income, offering flexibility that allows people to balance work with personal, family or educational commitments. For some, gig work is essential for meeting living expenses, supplementing their income or bridging gaps during career transitions or periods between jobs. For others, it serves to supplement a primary income or enable an individual to build a career around their interests or passions by facilitating freelance work. According to the ABS, in 2023 the proportion of people reporting engagement with digital platform work was just under one per cent of the employed population, and while this may be a small share of the workforce, for many it represents a crucial source of income and opportunity, and these workers deserve the same protections and safeguards afforded to other members of the workforce.

As of late 2022, there were over 2,000 rideshare vehicles in the ACT compared to 266 registered taxis. That is more than 2,000 working drivers on the road in the ACT not entitled to the safety net entitlements that all workers deserve, relying on limited private or platform-provided insurance, while taxi drivers have access to workers compensation. These drivers face considerable personal and financial vulnerability as a result, with little protection against the consequences of accidents, injuries or other risks inherent in their work. While they are likely to have access to motor accident insurance in the event of a crash, this does not work in the same way as workers compensation.

Now, that is only one aspect of the gig economy but this is repeated over and over in so many parts of it. Gig economy workers are already vulnerable workers. They have low pay; little, if any, entitlements because of limited bargaining power; and if the app they are working through will not let them log on that day, they simply have no work that day. Gig economy workers are also often migrants and students—already vulnerable cohorts of workers.

That brings me to the question: what is workers compensation? According to Safe Work Australia, workers compensation is a form of insurance which provides support to workers injured at work. It can include one-off lump sum payments, income replacement, and medical and rehabilitation expenses. Each state and the Commonwealth have different schemes and different coverage, but all employers must have workers compensation insurance for their workers, and all are underpinned by the notion that people injured at work should be cared for, have their wages covered and be helped back into the workforce.

Are gig economy workers employees? Unfortunately, gig economy workers are usually engaged as independent contractors, not employees, meaning the platforms are not considered employers and are not required to have workers compensation insurance. Amendments to the Fair Work Act last year, through the Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024, established, at a national level, a process for the Fair Work Commission to develop minimum employment standards for “employee-like” workers like those in the gig economy, ensuring basic entitlements such as pay and leave.

While these reforms indicate a significant step towards addressing unfair working conditions, the Fair Work Act does not regulate workplace health and safety or workers compensation, but the reforms do signal a need to do more to recognise and protect

these workers. Safe Work Australia, a Commonwealth agency that works with states and territories, unions and employers to develop national policy relating to workplace health and safety and workers compensation, has asked the states and territories to explore ways to expand workers compensation coverage to gig economy workers and to try and take a consistent approach across the country.

I know there is some nervousness about extending workers compensation and how it would work in practice, and I acknowledge that. It is why my motion is calling on the ACT government to investigate the expansion of workers compensation to gig economy workers. I have suggested a couple of mechanisms, such as expanding the current private sector scheme or creating a specific one for gig workers, making sure they are not disadvantaged from other private sector workers. But I acknowledge this is not the easiest thing to do, so I trust the government and the hardworking public servants who get tasked with this, to explore the options, look at what is happening in other jurisdictions, look at the changes to the Fair Work Act and the process going on in the Fair Work Commission, and work out the best path forward to protect gig economy workers.

Queensland, for example, has started down the path of expanding workers compensation to parts of the gig economy workforce, and I spent a considerable part of my weekend doing deep dives into the complexities of what is going on in Queensland, reading papers, reviewing what has happened and ways forward in Queensland, and what I can say is that it is quite technical. But there is work being done out there, and there is a path forward for gig economy workers to have access to workers compensation.

On a different note, you might be thinking, “Ms Tough worked for workers compensation plaintiff lawyers in the past. She’s here to get more compensation for workers compensation lawyers.” But, no, that experience working alongside injured workers every day taught me the importance of workers compensation to injured people and their families. Imagine you are at work doing your job and you get injured. Maybe you are in construction and you injure your back and cannot lift anything; or you are a truck driver, and you break your leg in a crash and can no longer drive; or you are an office worker being severely bullied until one day you cannot get out of bed. These are things that happen to real people, and the consequences are real for them and their families.

Imagine you have been injured in one of these situations, but you have workers compensation and you know that your wages are going to be paid, your medical bills are going to be covered, you have a rehab plan and a back-to-work plan to start getting your life back on track, and that there might be a lump sum payment at the end of the claim. Insurers are not always the workers’ best friend. They will often do everything they can to get out of having to pay a claim, and sometimes you need a lawyer to advocate and help you navigate the system.

I have seen an injured worker whose insurer was withholding medical expenses so a person could not access physio, which meant they could not heal, which meant they could not get back to work, which meant they could not pay their bills. This places immense mental pressure on a person and their family when they should be able to recover and return to work. And for those people who are injured and will never return

to work or never return to a job that allows them to earn their full potential, workers compensation lump sum payments can be there to acknowledge this and make sure a person is okay, into the future.

I have sat on the phone with crying people who are in pain and just want to get better so they can be there for their kids, to enjoy a holiday and buy nice Christmas presents for the family. I have spoken to their partners about the juggle of going to work, getting their partner to treatment, and raising a family. I have talked clients through going to appointments with insurance doctors and been there for them afterwards, while they cry on the phone about the experience. But I have also seen the sheer relief on their faces when they are able to get back to work or they get a lump sum payment and they can move on with their life and get back to what they were doing—and that is with workers compensation coverage.

Now imagine that you are a food delivery driver and you come off your bike or you are a rideshare driver and you are injured in a crash or by a passenger, or a disability support worker engaged through a digital platform and you injure your back helping a client to get dressed in the morning. Maybe you are lucky and your platform has some form of personal injury or income protection insurance, or maybe you are in a financial position where you were able to obtain it yourself, so your income is going to be covered for a bit. Maybe some medical bills are covered for a bit if you are lucky. But who is there making sure you get the treatment you need, making sure you get back on track and get back to work, making sure there is money to pay the bills, money to pay the rent or the mortgage, and money to put food on the table?

It should not be luck of the draw if there is a basic kind of insurance through a digital platform. Just like other workers, gig economy workers have the right to be safe at work and the right to be supported if they are injured, which is why it is so important workers compensation is extended to cover them.

Enforcing workers being paid properly, having their entitlements, and being covered by workers compensation, is good for employers and good for business, too. It puts businesses on a level playing field. It stops one business undercutting another by skimping on their obligations. Just recently, the Assembly had a whole committee inquiry into the cost of insurance for business, but it did not consider the cost of being undercut by operators who do not have employees but get out of their obligations through dodgy independent contractor arrangements.

I just want to finish by saying that I know there is an amendment coming to this motion, and I reserve my right to speak on that either during the debate or in closing. I want to thank Ms Clay and her office for engaging in good faith on these motions and to Mr Cocks and his office, too, for discussions on them yesterday and today. But I briefly want to add that we have just had a committee inquiry into the cost of insurance for businesses here in the ACT. It was a committee made up of representatives from across every group in this chamber—the only one with representatives from every group. I think it is the biggest committee in this place. That was an inquiry that considered the issues raised in the amendment through the terms of reference. The inquiry made 21 recommendations about the cost of insurance, including workers compensation, for business and community organisations in the ACT, which the government has to respond to.

So, when considering the amendment on the table, consider this: what is the purpose of the motion that I have brought today? Is it a catch-all omnibus of workers compensation, or is it about extending workers compensation to a small number of vulnerable workers in our community who deserve to be safe at work? Is it about the cost for some businesses to operate with their current premiums, or is it giving access to a small number of workers so that if they are injured they can pay their bills and be supported back to work? Is it about sectors who have access to the private workers compensation market and the countless providers that are there, or is it about expanding the scheme to cover those who currently do not have access at all? Is it about something that is just been considered by a committee and that the government is currently working on a response to, or is this a separate issue about equity and making sure that everyone who goes to work is safe and if something happens to them, they are looked after? I commend my motion.

MS LEE (Kurrajong) (4.42): I thank Ms Tough for bringing this motion regarding gig economy workers and their access to workers compensation, and I rise to speak on behalf of Mr Cocks. The Canberra Liberals will be supporting this motion, not because we are convinced by the government's track record on these matters, not because we believe the way forward is clear, but because all workers deserve to be protected and this issue is one that deserves proper consideration.

If this Assembly is serious about supporting vulnerable workers, then we must engage in an evidence based, nationally consistent conversation about what that support should look like. There is no denying that the gig economy has grown substantially over the past decade. More than 100 platforms operate nationally, and here in the ACT we know gig work is increasingly present in food delivery, rideshare, cleaning and support services. Often the people doing this work are students, migrants and low-income workers doing what they can to earn a living. And when they are injured, the safety net is not always there.

That is a problem. But, as always, the solution must be carefully designed, because we are talking about not just a change to an insurance scheme, but about redefining the boundary between employment and contractor status, and that is no small thing. Whilst we are supporting this motion today, let us be clear that any future legislation will have to overcome some very real concern if it is to secure the support of the Canberra Liberals.

So let us talk about those concerns. The first concern is about clarity of definition. The term "gig worker" is broad and evolving. In this motion that we have seen from Ms Tough, reference is made to "platform work" and "employee-like workers", yet there is still clearly ambiguity that needs to be addressed. If legislation is brought forward, we need to see clear definitions of who is covered and, just as importantly, who is not covered. Because without precision we risk creating more confusion than clarity.

The second concern is about the potential overlap with recent Commonwealth reforms. The Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024 already creates a new category of employee-like workers. It makes little sense for the ACT to legislate in parallel without understanding how these national reforms are landing in

practice. If the Commonwealth is building a safety net, we need to know where the gaps are before we try to fill them.

The third concern is about how coverage will be triggered. Is it when a worker logs onto the app, accepts a job, completes a task? What happens if they are logged on to three apps at once? These are not hypothetical questions; these are operational questions that any compensation scheme must answer with clarity, fairness and enforceability. Without that we risk seeing administrative errors and disputes skyrocketing.

The fourth concern—and this cannot be overstated—is about who pays. Will it be the platform? Will it be the worker? Will it be subsidised through the existing private sector compensation scheme? In Queensland a staged funding approach is being explored, but it remains unclear whether that will work in other jurisdictions. Here in the ACT we already have the most expensive workers' compensation premiums in the country. Any new burden placed on that scheme risks further increasing premiums for all employers, undermining business confidence and cost competitiveness. We will not support a new measure that raises premiums on local businesses without ironclad modelling and proper safeguards, nor during a cost-of-living crisis do we want to see a cost burden for the consumer.

We raise these concerns not as roadblocks but as reminders—reminders that good intentions are not enough; reminders that if we are going to legislate in this space, we have a duty to get it right. That means consulting widely with workers, platforms, businesses and insurers. It means waiting for the national approach, being led by Safe Work Australia, to mature. It means aligning the ACT model with the national framework and definitions to avoid duplication, confusion or costs blowouts.

This motion does not seek to legislate today. It does seek to investigate. It does seek to understand whether there is a workable, sustainable way to protect workers who, as things stand, are falling through the cracks, and this is worth supporting. But let us be clear: any bill that comes forward will, of course, face a higher bar, and we will not support a patchwork or politically motivated solution that does more harm than good, because getting this wrong would not just be bad policy; it would be bad for the very people this motion seeks to help.

In closing, we support this motion because every worker deserves dignity and safety, whether they are on payroll or on the platform, and we urge the government to proceed with caution. Let us not jump the gun on national reform; let us not create complexity where clarity is needed; and let us not place further cost pressures on local employers without fully understanding the impact.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (4.48): I would like to speak to Ms Tough's motion. The Greens will support Ms Tough's motion. I thank her for her deep and genuine commitment to the field and the care she has brought to this area. I also thank Ms Lee for her carefully considered comments on this issue. I move the amendment circulated in my name:

After paragraph (3)(b), insert:

“(c) review other sectors struggling to pay for workers compensation premiums, including the arts and frontline community services, and consider

what support government can provide for workers and to ensure sustainability of services for Canberrans;”.

The amendment that I have put forward is fairly simple. It is that, along with Ms Tough’s motion, the government should also review other sectors struggling to pay for workers compensation premiums, including the arts and frontline community services, and consider what support the government can provide for workers to ensure sustainability of services for Canberrans.

We have been told so much by the arts sector and frontline community services, so it strikes us as a massively wasted opportunity to look at workers compensation at this point and not also look at workers compensation for them. We know that we have systemic issues across the board regarding insurance. Workers compensation is one of those insurances. We have quite a lot of information about this. My amendment is a really simple amendment to make sure that the government looks at the rest of the picture.

The ACT Legislative Assembly’s inquiry into insurance costs in the ACT received some pretty concerning evidence. It noted significantly higher public liability insurance and workers compensation costs across many industries in Canberra—in particular, the arts and creative sectors and our frontline crisis services. The arts sector is struggling. A submission from the ACT’s art centres noted there has been a reported 50 per cent increase in premiums on workers compensation that varied from 13 per cent up to 205 per cent. That does not include public liability costs, which also skyrocketed.

For our young and emerging artists, public liability insurance is a luxury not everyone can afford, and so is workers compensation insurance. The kicker is that they need these insurances if they are going to perform. How are our artists meant to perform, build their career and refine their skills if we have set them up in a system that blocks them from doing that?

We understand that, particularly in the arts sector, there is intersectionality of gig workers. In our creative sector, a lot of artists and creatives are working in gig economy platforms and in real-world venues. They are often using online apps. Also, they are often working in non-digital ways. The government will have to consider that intersectionality for our creatives in the arts sector, because they are already working in all of those fields.

We have also recently heard pretty distressing news that our community sector is in crisis. I love the way this motion begins. It begins with a broad value statement, and it sounds like we all agree with it: “all workers deserve to be safe at work and have access to proper workers compensation”. Ms Tough did such an articulate job of explaining what happens when people are locked out of that. It is so important. But that statement applies to more than just digital gig economy workers, as defined in a piece of legislation at the moment.

It is not a great idea for the government to narrow their focus so narrowly and to cut out so many of the workers that we have just been told in this parliament are struggling. The one that comes to mind most quickly for me is the Domestic Violence Crisis Service. They gave us evidence that their workers compensation insurance has been the

most significant cost increase in their organisation. Their premiums have increased 450 per cent since pre-COVID premiums. For context, the increase that they are funding could pay for more than three full-time frontline crisis workers. It could assist hundreds of women and children in Canberra each year. They told us that they are cutting services so that they can pay their premiums. If the government ask the question, there is a pretty good chance that they will find out that a lot of our frontline services in the community sector are in the same position.

DVCS noted their increased cost of insurance is a threat to their long-term viability. They said they need to leave positions vacant or, in some cases, remove them from the service entirely. They said that, in the last 12 months, they have had no choice but to remove two management-level roles and three positions from the crisis intervention team to reduce their costs. This is an obvious risk for our community. We cannot let critical frontline services fail when they are the ones who are helping Canberrans. To let them fail because they cannot afford the workers compensation premiums is an unacceptable situation. These are trusted services that the community wants and needs to provide life-saving support.

We also need to consider the psychosocial hazards of the people working in these frontline crisis and emergency response services. Just like domestic, family and sexual violence, homelessness and mental health responses, the people who work in these services are exposed to high levels of risk, burnout and psychosocial hazards, so we really need to make sure that, when we look at this issue, we also look at how it is impacting our frontline community services.

I note that the government at the last sitting chose to underwrite the dying horse racing industry through a government insurance scheme. That scheme comes into effect today, so it is clear to us that the Labor government can make fairly quick decisions if they choose to. They have chosen to do so for one particular industry. It is great that they look at workers compensation premiums and access to insurance for another industry today, but it is unacceptable to continue to look at tiny pockets of need and pick favourites when we are being told, in parliamentary committee inquiries, about the needs across many of Canberra's crisis services.

I am pleased to say that it looks like the amendment has general support. We expect that this amendment will pass today. We will certainly vote for Ms Tough's motion. I am looking forward to seeing some really good, targeted information from government and some really good solutions coming forward to help all of our sectors that are really struggling with this issue.

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) (4.55): I rise to speak in support of Ms Tough's motion. I acknowledge her continued advocacy for the rights and dignity of workers in the ACT.

The ACT government recognises that everyone has the right to be safe in their work and, if injured, to be provided dignity and support in their recovery. This is a commitment we are proud to make. We recognise, however, that the nature of work continues to evolve and that we must ensure our laws continue to uphold this

commitment. The rise of gig economy apps is a key example of this. Gig work apps have surged in the last decade, especially since the pandemic. Hundreds of app based platforms are now operating in Australia across a wide array of industries. Most commonly, and as most would be familiar with, this has been through ride share and food delivery apps. There are apps for everything, from cleaning to disability support, home maintenance and career services, and there is even an app to find someone to walk your dog.

As the prevalence of these platforms grows, our approach to the people who are engaged with them needs to evolve. Questions of whether someone is a worker or a contractor become unclear, especially in situations where the person engaged has limited to no control over the work they do. Take the example of two people delivering a pizza. One is engaged directly by a pizza chain as a casual employee. The other is an independent contractor through an app. Both are driving the same kind of car, delivering the same kind of food and are following predetermined instructions on when and where they are going. Both can work the hours that suit them and both can quit the work at any time, yet, in the event of a workplace injury, one of them can expect their wages to be supported, medical bills to be met and to be assisted in returning to the workforce—the one engaged with the pizza chain. The other has an unclear pathway, with questions around who their legal engager is, who they can turn to for support, and what kind of insurance protections they may have. This is a challenge that governments must now grapple with: the creation of two approaches to injuries arising in work.

I am proud to say that the ACT has endorsed Safe Work Australia's proposed national policy approach to workers compensation and the gig economy. Recognising the complexity of the problem we are faced with, Safe Work Australia has developed five principles to guide the response. I would like to touch briefly on the first two principles as I believe these are most central to Ms Tough's motion. The first and most fundamental principle is that the emergence of digital labour platforms has changed how some people are engaged to undertake work. This has resulted in fewer protections in the event they sustain an injury or illness at work. This is the critical point of Ms Tough's motion and the issue we are facing. These people are in an employment-like relationship with diminished protections, have low income compared to award wages and have limited ability to meaningfully influence the work they do. It is a cohort that, if injured, will have a materially different experience to another worker, yet they do not engage in materially different work. We must consider carefully how we can ensure that, when someone is in this situation, they receive the appropriate protections.

The second principle is that workers compensation should be considered for gig workers engaged on digital labour platforms. Each jurisdiction operates a workers compensation scheme that is different yet aims to achieve the same outcome: supporting injured workers. Considerable work will need to go into understanding how we can best expand these protections. Queensland has already started this effort, having legislated a framework that will see gig economy workers brought under their workers compensation scheme.

These changes provide an initial pathway for other governments to consider as they look at addressing this issue. With Ms Tough's motion, this is exactly the work the ACT government will do. Addressing this issue will not be straightforward, and I will

continue to work with my counterparts in other jurisdictions on finding the best approach. I look forward to keeping the Assembly updated on this work as it progresses. The central point of today's motion is about how we respond to people falling through the gaps of our workers compensation scheme. It is about the experience of injured workers and how we ensure that they are adequately protected.

The points raised by Ms Clay's amendments are important and I genuinely appreciate her continued advocacy for arts sector entities and employers in our community. The recent inquiry into insurance costs that Ms Clay references provided significant insights into employers' experiences of workers compensation premiums. Work is well underway on the ACT government's response to that inquiry and I look forward to the government tabling it.

The issue that Ms Tough's motion raises and asks the government to undertake work on is the issue of those who are in employee-like conditions yet receive limited to no support following a workplace injury. This is a matter that I was disappointed to see receive limited attention in the committee's recent inquiry as it fell outside of the terms of reference that they drafted. It is a body of work that is important and I firmly believe it deserves its own focus. For this reason, respectfully, we will not support Ms Clay's amendment.

The recommendations of the inquiry did not go to the approach contemplated by Ms Clay's amendment. It would likely require significant consideration in its own right. This work would be quite different to the work that would be undertaken in response to Ms Tough's motion, and I do not think it would be of assistance to either issue by attempting to deal with both together. However, I genuinely appreciate the continued interest of the Assembly in workers compensation matters and I look forward to the further advocacy on this matter that will take place.

Question put:

That the amendment be agreed to.

The Assembly voted—

Ayes 13

Noes 8

Chiaka Barry	James Milligan
Andrew Braddock	Deborah Morris
Peter Cain	Laura Nuttall
Fiona Carrick	Mark Parton
Leanne Castley	Shane Rattenbury
Jo Clay	
Thomas Emerson	
Jeremy Hanson	

Andrew Barr
Yvette Berry
Tara Cheyne
Suzanne Orr
Michael Pettersson
Rachel Stephen-Smith
Caitlin Tough
Taimus Werner-Gibbings

Amendment agreed to.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (5.07): I want to make a couple of points. I thank Ms Tough very much for bringing this motion forward. I was, at the start of her speech, relieved to hear that she is not a shill for workers compensation lawyers. I think

that was an important point to make; when I saw it, I did wonder. I am speaking from the perspective of being a member of the committee that recently delivered the insurance report. I am not speaking as the chair of that committee in this instance; I am speaking as a member of the Assembly, in which case I wholeheartedly commend the committee for the work that it did on this report. As Ms Tough mentioned, it has a member of every single party and Independent on it. We started off with six members. We lost a member and gained another member. We then lost two members, and gained a different member, but we were able to keep the work going.

With the work we did, it did cover what the Greens amendment asks for. We did the work about asking other sectors how they were struggling or how they were getting through paying for workers compensation premiums. We had members of the arts organisations in the ACT and members of frontline community services who appeared before us.

Ms Tough's motion and the Greens amendment that has now been shoehorned into the motion talk about and refer to two completely different issues. My problem with the amendment that has just been passed is that it does not necessarily undermine Ms Tough's motion, but it does dilute its intent and the utility of the subsequent government response.

Ms Tough's motion was about expanding workers compensation to gig workers. The amendment that we have just voted on is about thinking how workers compensation premiums impact arts and frontline community services, and what support the government can provide. They are two completely different issues.

As a committee, we did not look at the issue raised by Ms Tough—expanding workers compensation to gig workers—but we did very much look at how arts and frontline community services are impacted by workers compensation premiums. We did the work. It is all there in the report. We made recommendations to government. We asked the questions that Ms Clay raised just now. There were 21 recommendations in the report. Of those, recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 are relevant or reasonably relevant to the issues raised in the amendment that we have just voted on. It is not necessary.

I would urge the government, as far as possible within the terms of the amended motion, to keep and target its response to the impacts and the possibilities of expanding workers compensation to gig workers, because, as I said just now, there is no information. The government has not previously been asked to do any work on that issue. It is already doing a significant amount of work, thanks to the committee's report on insurance in the ACT, about the impact on arts and frontline community services insurance premiums.

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (5.11): In closing, I want to start by thanking everyone in the chamber today for supporting my motion. I want to take a moment to thank the unions and the gig workers who have been fighting for years to have gig workers recognised as workers, and to get these workers the legal protections they deserve, whether that be workers comp, employee life entitlements and other basic things that employees take for granted.

I also thank my former public service colleagues who navigated the complexities of gig workers to create the employee-like provisions in the Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act last year. I was not part of that work, but I witnessed firsthand how they navigated it—the complexities, all the little intricate things as to who a gig worker is and how this would work, and the dedication they put into it. It is why I trust the ACT public service to navigate these complexities of how to expand workers compensation to gig workers. The work of Closing Loopholes is separate from work health and safety and workers compensation, but the need to protect gig workers links them.

I thank Minister Pettersson and his office for the engagement on this issue, and the useful discussions about it and broader industrial relations reforms around gig workers over the last week or so. I thank Ms Clay for her engagement with the amendment, and being available to chat between my committee meetings and other things this week. Obviously, we did not support the amendment, but I still appreciated the good faith that she brought to negotiating it in the last couple of days. I thank Mr Milligan and Mr Cocks for their offices' engagement on this. I sprang it on Mr Milligan yesterday in a committee meeting that I had a motion that maybe he would be interested in. I also thank Ms Lee and the Canberra Liberals for supporting the motion.

As I said previously, I know there are concerns around how it could work practically, but I appreciate members' support for it to be investigated nonetheless, and to see what can be done. I share the concern that we have to get this right. The last thing I want to do is harm the workers that I am seeking to protect, so I do appreciate the comments. I know I lost the vote on the amendment. That is fine. It was a fun division, even if someone said "no" a bit too loudly.

I echo what my colleagues have said. It does go beyond the scope of what the motion was trying to achieve. However, at the end of the day, it will not stop the government investigating expanding workers compensation to gig economy workers. I thank my colleague Mr Werner-Gibbings, who was part of the insurance committee inquiry, for his contribution to the debate and his insight, and Mr Pettersson as well.

I find it amusing that the amendment calls for something that was canvassed in what appeared to be a very intensive, detailed committee inquiry into insurance costs in the ACT which reported not even a month ago—an inquiry that made 21 recommendations to government that the government will be responding to very shortly.

I want to acknowledge what Ms Clay said in her amendment. The work that our frontline community services do is incredible. It is important. It is valuable. I want to acknowledge the work that DVCS does every single day, helping vulnerable Canberrans, and the same goes for other frontline services. This is nothing against DVCS and others. It just was not really in the scope of the motion. But I do appreciate the intent. The same goes for our arts and creative sectors. They are invaluable to our community.

Going back to the motion, I hope this is the first step in expanding workers compensation to gig workers in the ACT. The digital platforms are making a fortune while the workers are earning a pittance, while the workers do not yet have basic workplace entitlements, and while the workers are not protected if they are injured at

work.

These platforms that we all use to get food delivered have overtaken restaurants having their own home delivery services. They charge these businesses a fortune for the convenience of being on the platform, and the businesses see very little return for it. As Minister Pettersson pointed out, where a restaurant or a fast-food outlet has in-house delivery drivers and externally engaged gig workers doing delivery through an online platform, there is a discrepancy between these workers, just on a shift-to-shift basis. And there is a huge contrast when there is a workplace injury for these workers.

I thank the chamber for supporting my motion. I think this is a really great first step in supporting gig workers. I look forward to seeing the government report back in the future. It is something on which I will continue to stay engaged. I commend my motion.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

Papers

Motion to take note of papers

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

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

Statements by members

Macquarie—swimming pool

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (5.17): Recently, I was at Jamison shopping centre doing a mobile office and a couple who lived in the area came up to me. They were so passionate about asking me what I was doing to make sure that Big Splash stayed open. It reminded me that we do not want to forget about this issue. What is the government doing to make sure that this neglected site is being restored, repaired and secured, and that this wonderful water park is made available to our community again?

I do welcome some recent clarifications. The site remains zoned PRZ2, but what is happening? Is the government making sure that the site is being used for that allowed purpose? Is the site getting further neglected? Is rubbish being dumped there? I urge the government to keep the community updated on one of Belconnen's—in fact, Canberra's—premier recreational facilities that is no more. I urge the government to tell the community, to assure it, that Big Splash will be back.

Diwali celebrations

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (5.19): Diwali, also known as the Festival of Lights, is the most widely celebrated Indian festival. It is celebrated by many different religions, including Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism, and it is celebrated across South Asia. It is also celebrated by a significant number of Canberrans—these community members who generously share their celebrations with their neighbours, their community and their elected representatives.

There are several stories behind the origins of Diwali. Regardless, it is an opportunity for celebration, coming together and festivities. For five days, children and adults come together wearing their finest clothing and joyously celebrate this occasion. Families start preparing for Goddess Lakshmi's arrival weeks in advance by decorating their porches with colourful designs, or rangoli, preparing sweets or savouries, and lighting divos. On the night before Diwali, devotees light divos, symbolically asking Bhagwan to expel their ignorance and enlighten their souls. Lights, candles and fireworks are an integral part of the decor of the festivities.

The festival starts on Dhan Teras, when devotees pray to the Goddess Lakshmi for ethical economic prosperity and success in their careers. The festivities then continue with Sharda Pujan, where businessmen and students purify their accounting ledgers and academic books.

Thousands of families gather together for Diwali, and I would like to say happy Diwali to all.

Whitlam—Diwali celebrations

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (5.20): I would like to thank the Whitlam community for inviting me to their Diwali celebrations on Sunday. The performers were terrific and, while I did not see all of them, I understand there were around 27 performances. There were food stalls and creative activities that brought the community together to help build relationships in their new suburb of Whitlam.

The car park and stage were decorated and, with the colourful clothes, it was a very colourful event. It was a beautiful day, and warm in the car park. I urge the government to build this community a community centre so that they can get together in comfort to celebrate their cultural milestones and broader community events. Happy Diwali day.

Macquarie—swimming pool

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (5.21): I am pleased to provide some good news about Big Splash. I am sorry to note that the planning minister is not here. He has written to me, and he had some really welcome news. We ran a motion in parliament and sponsored a community petition on this matter, and it does seem to have delivered some good results, which is really great to see.

The minister has advised that Access Canberra issued a controlled activity order and the owners are now required to repair and maintain the fence and bring the block back into good order. It is great to see government using those regulatory powers.

There is even better news. The owners have advised Access Canberra that, through a program of works, they are planning to reopen the water park in mid-November 2025. This is all looking really promising. We are pleased to see ACT government's interaction by way of this proactive regulation on this site. If that does deliver the results that we are looking for, it will be a really great outcome for the Belconnen community.

Discussion concluded.

Multicultural affairs—peak bodies—standing order 118AA

MR SPEAKER: There was a point of order raised at the end of question time under standing order 118AA from Ms Barry, who suggested that Mr Pettersson did not sufficiently answer her question. Her question to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs was, “What process do you use to identify which community organisations you deal with as peak bodies?” Mr Pettersson’s answer was, “I do not think there is a process or framework for that,” before going on to indicate that he discussed matters with all and sundry. Certainly, the Clerk and I have formed a view that the minister has answered the question.

Adjournment

Motion (by **Ms Cheyne**) proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Youth—Raise Our Voice in Parliament campaign

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (5.23): I am changing things up today. I rise not to share my own words, but those of a young person from Yerrabi called Taylor, who has taken part in the Raise Our Voice in Parliament campaign. This initiative connects young people with their local representatives, giving them a chance to answer the question, “What steps should the government take today to build a better tomorrow for young Australians?” This is what Taylor had to say:

I work in Parliament and every day I see how decisions are made—how the system works from the inside. But I also know what it’s like to be on the outside looking in.

I grew up moving in and out of women’s refuges with my mum and sister, escaping domestic violence. We lived in government housing, surviving on a disability pension. I’ve seen the cracks in the system—the long waitlists, the impossible hoops to jump through, the silence that follows cries for help.

I’m proud of how far I’ve come. I’ve broken a cycle. But breaking a cycle shouldn’t be this hard.

We need more funding for government housing, more support for women’s refuges, and real pathways for families fleeing violence.

But it doesn’t stop there. We need early intervention programs that prevent abuse before it starts—education, counselling, support for potential abusers to break their own cycles.

We often say children are the future. Let’s make sure they don’t have to survive their childhoods to build a better one.

I know change is possible. I see it every day in Parliament. Let’s make it happen where it matters most—at home.

Thank you, Taylor, for sharing your reflections with us. Your words are a valuable reminder of what matters most in the work we do in this parliament.

Transport Canberra—bus shelters

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (5.25): I was doing some doorknocking recently and an elderly person living next to a busy road which is a major bus route said, “It’s difficult for me sometimes,” because the bus stop that is there is on a busy route; she wants to use public transport but it is uncovered, and she has trouble in our Canberra weather.

I want to bring to the government’s attention the importance of covered bus shelters, particularly for our elderly, and particularly on busy bus routes. To me, that is a no-brainer. If it is a frequently used road, surely, there should be some amenity for people, to encourage people to use public transport. One way that you can encourage people to use public transport is for them to be comfortable while waiting for a bus, such as the Civic 101 service.

If the minister is interested, I can certainly point out the particular road. In fact, as she knows, I have written about the particular instance. It is a general issue that I am pointing out. It is particularly prominent during my discussions in west Belconnen, as I talk to people at their doors. When you are at someone’s door, of course, it is not hard to see that there is a bus stop there, and that it is not covered.

Canberra has a very good reputation for iconic bus shelters. It is an opportunity to enhance the message about Canberra, and have something cool to say to the rest of the country. Why don’t we do that a bit more, and have something cool to say about our city, the capital of this wonderful nation? Those iconic bus shelters—

Ms Stephen-Smith interjecting—

MR CAIN: How about a few more of them, Minister? I do not know why the health minister is protesting. Surely, cover in unpleasant weather is pretty good for your health. Minister, I am not quite sure why you are interjecting.

I want to throw the challenge out there. The government has an agenda to encourage uptake of public transport. Guess what might encourage uptake of public transport? Making it really attractive and convenient—even cool—to wait for a bus in one of our iconic bus shelters. There are issues that go to the maintenance of them, tidiness, attractiveness, and whether they need painting. It is not rocket science to work out whether something needs a bit of tender, loving care.

I certainly encourage the government to take seriously their policy agenda to encourage public transport, and particularly to make our bus stops not only as sheltered as possible but as attractive as possible, and to encourage people to say, “I don’t mind waiting there for a bus; I’d look pretty cool in one of those iconic bus shelters.”

Youth—Raise Our Voice in Parliament campaign

MR RATTENBURY (Kurrajong) (5.28): Like Mr Braddock, I am giving a speech today on behalf of Victor, who is taking part in in the Raise Our Voice Australia

campaign to mobilise young people to transform politics and have their say in parliament.

For years now, Raise Our Voice has been helping young people see that, in the face of a complex and complicated world, their voice is powerful in making change. The Raise Our Voice in Parliament campaign is a chance for young people to make an impact. It is open to anyone aged 25 and under. The campaign gives young Australians a platform to share their ideas and influence politics and policy.

The Greens are firm believers that young people, as the people who inherit the world of tomorrow, deserve to have a say in the decisions that are being made today. I am very pleased to take part in this campaign, and I acknowledge that Victor is with us in the gallery today. I welcome him to the ACT Legislative Assembly, and I will now share his speech. He said:

My name is Victor and I am a 17-year-old high school student. I live in the Kurrajong electorate. Coming from a middle-income immigrant family, I am extremely fortunate to attend a great school. My parents have always believed that education is the key to personal development and future successes. However, not everyone receives the same privileges that I do.

Australia's education system is letting down the most vulnerable. Every child should deserve access to well-funded schools, well-trained teachers, and a curriculum that prepares them for the challenges of the modern world. Education should be a right, not a privilege.

We often say that today's students are tomorrow's leaders. They represent our future problem solvers, policy makers and innovative thinkers. If you agree, why are so many youth, the most vulnerable members of our society, still being deprived of access to basic educational needs? It is time that we listened to our children.

We would like parliament to consider young voices when forming legislation around our education. We want to be heard. We want to be supported. We want more engaging conversation so communities can actively voice their opinions and shape the direction of policies that affect their futures. Thank you.

Those are Victor's words. I think they are ones that we should heed, and I thank him for taking part in this program and sharing his thoughts with us, and his perspectives as a young person here in Canberra.

Youth—Raise Our Voice in Parliament campaign

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (5.31): Like Mr Braddock and Mr Rattenbury, I rise to give a speech written by a local school student from the Murrumbidgee electorate as part of the excellent Raise Our Voice in Parliament Campaign:

Take a minute to imagine yourself looking out and seeing so many girls playing sports all year round. They all have huge smiles on their faces, and you can hear so much laughing.

My name is Chloe. I am 12 years old, and I am from Charles Weston School. I

myself play soccer, and I enjoy every minute of it. I am writing this speech so that you understand that it is important that girls play sports. These days, 46 per cent of girls are playing sports compared to 69 per cent of boys playing sports, and that means not even half of girls are playing sports.

This is because of many reasons. One, because of gender stereotypes; two, because of not enough advertising and girls just think it's a boy's sport; three, they know that they won't be paid enough so there's no point. That is bad, wrong and disappointing. It is important that girls play sports because it builds a higher self-esteem, self-confidence, lower rates of depression and will become more social.

To make a better future, let's convince girls to play sports. The government needs to put up advertisements, go do talks to schools to convince girls to play, lower the prices so everybody, even boys, are able to have fun. Have you heard of the sports voucher in New South Wales. I think we should do that because that would definitely help the problem. Make sure you also close the pay gap for all women in sports so girls know they are worth something. Please join me in helping everyone to play sports.

Thank you, Chloe, for participating in this campaign with a great message in your speech. I would like to hear more from you, your views and that of your school friends. Thank you.

Youth—Raise Our Voice in Parliament campaign

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (5.33): Like Mr Braddock, Mr Rattenbury and Ms Carrick, I too rise to deliver a speech as part of Raise Our Voice in Parliament Week. This is on behalf of Arby:

Australia has one of the best public education systems in the world; however, this right is not equally accessible, especially for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Australia's future hinges on the younger generation's education and investing in that education is investing in Australia. In fact, the average 15 year old from a lower socioeconomic background is three years behind peers from a higher socioeconomic position in subjects, such as maths and science.

Many different initiatives have attempted to address the issue. My idea to help young, disadvantaged Australians is to introduce more subsidies for schools in low socioeconomic areas, as well as increasing the amount of scholarships available for disadvantaged children. We would use census data to identify critical areas, then implement government subsidies that improve school conditions and lower fees. This will help break financial barriers that prevent disadvantaged students from attending school. The impacts can take a range of different forms, including cutting fees of various kinds, introducing free lunches, and having better free stationery in schools as opposed to the student being burdened with extra costs.

An ideal future is one where education is accessed by everyone, no matter their financial backgrounds.

On that, I could not agree with Arby more.

Health—Tuggeranong Town Centre free health precinct

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (5.35): I rise to optimistically note the ACT government and commonwealth government's cooperation and joint investment in what has become the Tuggeranong Town Centre's free health precinct, a precinct that is not only welcomed by my fellow citizens but one that they feel is deeply necessary.

The Tuggeranong Town Centre free health precinct is a statement by the ACT and commonwealth Labor governments envisioned and delivered over multiple budgets. It is a statement that health care should be accessible, local and free at the point of need. It is proof positive that Tuggeranong is well and truly back on the map and that its residents, like all Canberrans, deserve and will receive the dignity of timely quality care regardless of income, background or circumstance.

The cornerstone of the precinct is the Tuggeranong walk-in centre, located on the corner of Anketell and Pitman streets. This ACT government facility provides free nurse-led care for non-life threatening conditions, whether your baby daughter has stuck her finger in your eye as you give her a cuddle or your teenage son has stuck a fishhook through his finger cleaning his room, with no appointment and no Medicare card required; just care—the kind of health system that Labor is committed to.

That is where the Interchange Health Coop, now reopened as the Tuggeranong Family Medical Centre, comes in. This fully bulk-billed GP and allied health clinic has served thousands of Tuggeranong residents, many of whom had nowhere else to turn. Its recent reopening, secured by \$3.8 million in funding from federal Labor and supported by the ACT government, is a testament to what can be achieved when governments listen and act. I want to acknowledge the character of the patients and staff who advocated for its return. You were heard, and the hard work you do every day does not go unnoticed.

The Tuggeranong Medicare Mental Health Centre, opened in July this year, is a game changer. It is funded through the commonwealth's PHN program and operated by Think Mental Health. It is a centre that offers free, walk-in mental health support—again, no referral, no appointment and no Medicare card required.

Then there is the ACT government's Tuggeranong Child and Family Centre, which plays a vital role in supporting families across Canberra's south. It offers free services for children from prebirth to age eight, with some programs extending to age 12. Again, no appointment is needed. Families can access parent support, child development assessments, health checks and playgroups, all delivered by caring professionals in a welcoming environment.

While it is not free, I am also going to mention the Southside Hydrotherapy Pool, which is cheap. Located next to the Lakeside Leisure Centre, it is about 200 metres from the precinct proper. The need for this \$8.5 million facility was one of the first issues raised with me during my first candidacy in 2016. The ACT government listened to that need and delivered the pool, which was open for paddling in August. Designed with input from users, disability advocates and health professionals, it offers warm water therapy for people with arthritis, chronic pain, mobility issues and those recovering from surgery.

This precinct is not an accident; it is a result of deliberate policy choices and budgets

that prioritise people. The Tuggeranong Town Centre's free health precinct shows what can be done when governments invest in integrated community-based care. Pair this up with the new Canberra Hospital critical services building, which opened late last year, and the South Tuggeranong Health Centre, which is under construction.

I will finish by acknowledging the collaboration that made this possible. The ACT government, led by Chief Minister Barr and Minister Stephen-Smith, has shown vision and resolve; the commonwealth government, through its PHN program and Medicare mental health centres, has stepped up; and, most importantly, the people of Tuggeranong, through their advocacy, their feedback and their lived experience, have shaped it. The Tuggeranong free health precinct is built not just with bricks and mortar but also with values—values of equity, compassion and community.

Health—cultural awareness

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (5.39): I rise to deliver this great speech on behalf of the lovely Gemma who we were lucky enough to host for work experience a couple of weeks ago. Through you, Mr Speaker, I say, "Thank you, Gemma, if you are watching the broadcast right now."

Health care is a very vulnerable and scary space for everyone in the ACT, but it is even more vulnerable and scary for people who come from different cultural backgrounds, because of a lot of different factors like language barriers, a lack of understanding of our health care system, discrimination that they might have to face in the system, and differing cultural views on health.

So, why would we not make our health care service more culturally aware for people in these communities? Well, yes and no. We have been able to make our health care more culturally aware for First Nations people, by bringing cultural knowledge to their health care such as cultural translators—this being Kristie Simpson and her team who bring these services to hospitals and allied health services in Canberra.

But there seems to be no culturally aware service for other cultures within our community. Being able to provide these services and education to our health care workers would mean that migrants or people from other cultures, that patients are able to feel like they are not being judged or discriminated against by health care workers.

Now, in a broader context in Australia, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare said that, as of 10 August 2021, three in 10 people living in Australia were born overseas, and people with low English proficiency have a higher prevalence of chronic conditions such as heart and kidney disease and mental health conditions. I do acknowledge that there is access to a health care interpreter in the ACT and this will help people with language barriers, but there is still a feeling of discrimination and differing values and opinions in the health care space.

The University of Sydney found findings that suggest that cultural awareness in health care means more than just celebrating diversity. It requires systemic change in how services are designed, delivered and communicated. This includes reducing discrimination, acknowledging intersectionality, and actively involving young people in shaping culturally safe health care environments. This issue is important to me because I want people, no matter what cultural background, to be able to

receive the correct care that they deserve.

Thank you for listening to my speech.

And that is from Gemma.

Goodall, Dame Jane—tribute

MS TOUGH (Brindabella) (5.42): While I do not have a Raise Your Voice speech today, I am hoping to be able to give one on Thursday when the student, Anna, can be here in person. But this was inspired by a constituent who recently came to see me at my joint mobile office at Tuggeranong library with my colleague, Mr Werner-Gibbings. So please indulge.

On 1 October, the world lost a pioneer and true champion of conservation and anthropology. Dame Valerie Jane Morris Goodall, or, as she preferred to be called, Jane Goodall, was a trailblazer in the field of biology and is arguably best known for her environmental conservation work with chimpanzees. Born in the United Kingdom in 1934 to a motorsport racing father and an accomplished novelist mother, Jane's curiosity about the environment, flora and fauna was nurtured and encouraged by both her family and the strong female relationships in her life.

At just 26 years of age, Jane made the now-iconic pilgrimage to Tanzania to study its chimpanzee population. This trip, marking the start of her ground-breaking research in the field of primatology, was the beginning of an incredible lifelong journey towards the betterment of the environment, understanding primate interactions outside of captivity, and for the promotion of female representation within the male-dominated science industry.

Jane Goodall was not only an inspiration and great mind within her field, she was also a dedicated advocate for children's education. She founded several philanthropic organisations—most notably Roots and Shoots, an initiative that empowers young people globally to advocate for the advancement of people, animals and the environment; and the Jane Goodall Institute, within which her work in the empowerment of women and girls, and the conservation of chimpanzees and their habitats, has continued with Australia's own branch located in Sydney, aiding Taronga Zoo and their own conservation efforts.

Both the subject and the author of many groundbreaking academic and literary works, Jane dedicated her life to the betterment of the environment and understanding the complex and vital role it plays in the world we know today. Her life, works and enduring legacy serve as a testament to her curiosity, courage and compassion. Her work not only in the fields of primatology and zoology, but also for the broader empowerment of women, will forever remain as a testament to her unwavering dedication to science and humanity. Her passing is a profound loss for the global community.

In an age where the environment is at the forefront of everyone's minds, may we continue to care for our world and for each other, as Jane so passionately and tirelessly advocated for. I offer her friends, family and the greater community my condolences on the loss of such an incredible individual. Thank you.

Allied Health Excellence Awards

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Finance and Minister for the Public Service) (5.44): Last Tuesday, the allied health community gathered at the Southern Cross Club in Woden to acknowledge the outstanding achievements at this year’s Allied Health Excellence Awards. The 2025 theme, “Stronger Together”, captures the essence of allied health: collaboration, teamwork, and a shared commitment to delivering the best possible outcomes for our community.

The celebrations also coincided with Allied Health Professionals Day, which is fitting because allied health professionals and assistants play a vital role in the health and wellbeing of all Australians and indeed, Canberrans. They bring unique expertise to patient care and are often at the forefront of identification, intervention and prevention—helping people recover faster, manage chronic conditions more effectively, and achieve better long-term health outcomes. Their contributions are essential to a strong, sustainable and person-centred health system.

The Allied Health Excellence Awards were hosted by the Office of the Chief Allied Health Officer, and I want to thank the office for the incredible work it did pulling this together. The awards recognise outstanding allied health professionals across nine categories including Excellence in Allied Health Assistance, Early Career, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Wellbeing, Team Excellence, Professional Practice, Management and Leadership, Education, Research, and Consumer Recognition.

In total, there were 95 nominees across the nine categories—a testament to the impact of allied health workers in supporting the health and wellbeing of our community. An incredible breadth of the more than 40 allied health professions in the ACT was represented, from dental to pathology, pharmacy to spiritual care, as well as the occupational therapists, speech therapists, physios and psychologists we might normally think of when we say “allied health”.

Mr Speaker, the highest honour, Allied Health Professional of the Year 2025, was awarded to Leah Robinson of Canberra Health Services, who also took out the Allied Health Management and Leadership category. Leah was recognised for outstanding commitment to ethical practice, authentic dedication to the wellbeing of clients and her steady, reflective leadership skills. Leah demonstrated exceptional dedication and impact on her profession, her colleagues and the ACT community.

The Consumer Recognition category provides an opportunity for patients and health consumers to recognise an allied health professional, assistant or team that has consistently provided extraordinary, safe, quality and compassionate care to them and/or their families. Brie Bobinskas, occupational therapist from the University of Canberra; and Briony Abraham and Jackie Lee from Como Therapy were winners of Consumer Recognition award.

Laura Colgan was recognised for Allied Health Assistance Excellence and Claire Lessels, an early career physiotherapist, was awarded for Early Career Excellence. Both

are from North Canberra Hospital physiotherapy department. The Practice Excellence category was won by Bjarne Kragh, director and physiotherapist at Southside Physio. The Allied Health Research Excellence award was presented to Carol McCrum, advanced practice physiotherapist and senior clinician in musculoskeletal and rheumatology at Canberra Health Services.

Nikki Noakes, ultrasound clinical educator within medical imaging at Canberra Hospital, was recognised in the Allied Health Education Excellence category. The Adult Acute Mental Health Services Allied Health Team from Canberra Health Services was recognised for Team Excellence and the allied health team at Yerrabi Yurwang Child and Family Aboriginal Corporation was recognised for Excellence in Provision of Service to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Wellbeing.

Mr Speaker, the breadth of units and sectors represented in these awards and across the 90-plus nominees demonstrates the diversity and reach of allied health in our health care system. On behalf of the ACT government and the wider community, I commend our allied health professionals and allied health assistants for their contribution to the ACT community, and their ongoing commitment to improving the lives of Canberrans.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 5.49 pm.