



DEBATES
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

DAILY HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

23 September 2026

This is an **EDITED PROOF TRANSCRIPT** of proceedings that is subject to further checking. Members' suggested corrections for the official *Weekly Hansard* are requested to be lodged in writing with the Hansard office no later than **Friday, 16 October 2026**.

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Wednesday, 23 September 2026

The Assembly met at 10.00 am.

(Quorum formed.)

MR SPEAKER (Mr Hanson) (10.01): 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.

Petition

The following petition was lodged for presentation:

Forrest Primary School—heating and cooling—petition 79-26

By Ms Carrick, from 523 residents:

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

The following residents of the ACT draw the attention of the Assembly to the fact that the 2019-20 ACT Budget included funding under the Delivering Energy Efficient Heating Upgrades for ACT Public Schools Program to upgrade and modernise heating systems at Forrest Primary School.

Forrest Primary School has more than 500 students and provides Before and After School Care services operating from 7.30am to 6.00pm, including during school holidays. Students, staff and families rely on the school providing a safe and comfortable learning and working environment throughout the year.

Forrest Primary School continues to rely on an ageing gas-fired boiler system that has experienced repeated breakdowns and reliability issues. The school community remains concerned that classrooms and learning spaces are not being maintained at appropriate temperatures during winter.

The ACT Government committed \$30 million at the 2024 election for a Public Schools Heating and Cooling Fund to improve heating, ventilation and air conditioning infrastructure in ACT public schools. However, the Forrest Primary School boiler has not yet been replaced, and no clear timeframe has been provided

for the necessary upgrade.

Your petitioners believe that students and staff are entitled to reliable heating and cooling infrastructure and that replacement of the Forrest Primary School boiler should be treated as a priority.

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

1. Commit to replacing the ageing boiler system at Forrest Primary School as a priority;
2. Provide a timeframe for the delivery of the replacement; and
3. Ensure students and staff at Forrest Primary School have access to safe, reliable and effective heating and cooling infrastructure.

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

Motion to take note of petition

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

That the petition so lodged be noted.

Forrest Primary School—heating and cooling—petition 79-26

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.02): I rise to speak to this petition, calling for the replacement of the ageing heating system at Forrest Primary School. Students and teachers deserve learning environments that are safe, comfortable and adequately heated during Canberra's cold winters yet the Forrest Primary School community continues to report problems with an aging and unreliable gas-fired boiler system.

What makes this issue particularly concerning is that the government has already committed to replacing the system. In the 2019-20 budget, Forrest Primary School was specifically identified as one of the schools to receive heating upgrades. Seven years later, that commitment remains undelivered and the school community is still waiting for a replacement. The school serves more than 500 students and hosts a before and after-care school program that operates from 7.30 am to 6 pm, including school holidays. Heating is essential during cold winters and at these times, as families rely on this facility every day.

The government has since announced further funding for heating and cooling upgrades across ACT public schools, yet Forrest Primary School does not appear on recent lists of schools identified as requiring upgrades despite ongoing concerns from the school community and reports of heating issues. That raises important questions about how schools are being assessed and prioritised for infrastructure investment.

The directorate does not maintain a single comprehensive list of all public schools requiring heating and cooling upgrades. This information is recorded and stored in a range of ways, including within the directorate's asset management software system, heating and cooling audit reports and other reports.

This petition is ultimately about accountability. If the government committed in 2019 to replace the heating system at Forrest Primary School, why has that commitment not been delivered? When can the school community finally expect action?

I thank the petitioners for bringing this matter before the Assembly, and urge the government to provide a clear timetable for the replacement of the Forrest Primary School boiler, and to honour the commitment it made to the community seven years ago.

Out-of-order petition

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (10.04): I seek leave to table a petition that does not conform to the standing orders. The petition relates to a crossing on Antill Street, Dickson.

Leave granted.

MS VASSAROTTI: I table:

Petition which does not conform with the standing orders—Dickson—Pedestrian crossing installation on Antill Street—Ms Vassarotti (180 signatures).

We spoke briefly yesterday to an e-petition that was tabled regarding a call for a pedestrian crossing on Antill Street. The out-of-order petition that has been tabled today makes the same calls of government and has also garnered 180 signatures. This has seen hundreds of people support the call to urgently move to improve pedestrian safety on Antill Street and install a crossing on the street.

I have an intimate understanding of this area. I lived on Antill Street for many years. My children have played football at Majura football club for many years and my children attended Dickson College—with one still there. This is a place that I move through on a regular basis.

When the principal petitioner, Shasta Bignell approached me regarding this issue, I completely understood why this was an issue. When we engaged with the school board at Dickson College, the organising committee at the football club, they got it and enthusiastically supported the calls.

When we went down to Saturday morning football, we spoke to parents who spoke around their real challenges about getting small children across the road safely. When we spoke with school students, they spoke of hair-raising experiences of getting across the road to get to school. It should not be the case that crossing the road to access education is a life-threatening experience. But from the stories I have heard, we are really lucky we have not yet had a real tragedy.

I acknowledge that in the correspondence leading up to the call on the government, the minister has noted that the issue has been identified, and there may be considerations of a crossing sometime in the future. However, I would urge the minister to move sooner, to ensure that we keep our local community safe.

While the petition did not meet the threshold of 500 signatures, we have seen hundreds of people support this call for urgent action; a pretty extraordinary response for a hyper-local issue. These are parents and school students asking to be kept safe. It is an issue that is widely felt, and there is a need to respond to this call.

Finally, I would just like to acknowledge the principal petitioner, Shasta. In our community, people often say that young people are disengaged and disinterested. I say that you are not spending enough time with young people. In Shasta, we have a real role model in relation to leadership. He has only just turned 18, and yet we have seen him champion a number of local causes focused on improving our community. It has been a pleasure working with him on this, and I look forward to continuing to support his leadership journey and partnering with him on other important local initiatives.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Economics, Industry and Recreation—Standing Committee Reference

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (10.08): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) according to data released by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Canberra is the most expensive capital city for petrol;
- (b) Canberra recorded the largest weekly increase in average prices in the week to 16 September 2026 at 17.3 cents per litre;
- (c) according to FuelCheck, unleaded petrol is around 10 cents per litre more expensive in Canberra than it is across the border in Queanbeyan; and
- (d) according to PetrolSpy, as of 11 am on 21 September 2026, Unleaded 91 was cheaper in Kalgoorlie, Katherine, Broken Hill and Hobart than it was in Canberra;

(2) further notes that:

- (a) on 14 February 2019, the Assembly established the Select Committee on Fuel Pricing, which would, among other things, consider reasons for significant price discrepancies between the ACT and other parts of Australia;
- (b) in 2019, the Treasurer also referred an investigation of motor vehicle petrol prices and competition in the ACT to the Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission (ICRC) which provided a factual analysis of prices and competition in the ACT;
- (c) the Select Committee reported in September 2019 following an extensive inquiry and made five recommendations directed towards ongoing market oversight, increased competition, real-time fuel price information, consumer education and examination of the costs faced by ACT fuel retailers;
- (d) in its response to the Select Committee report, the ACT Government said that it considers the ICRC is the most appropriate body to monitor fuel

- pricing and competition in the Territory;
- (e) since that inquiry, NSW FuelCheck has been extended to the ACT and continues to provide real-time fuel price information to ACT motorists;
 - (f) in Question Time last week, the Chief Minister was unable to give a clear answer as to what requests had been made to the ICRC in this regard; and
 - (g) on 7 May 2026, the Assembly passed the Fuel Legislation Amendment Bill 2026, which among other matters, provided the Government with the ability to better conduct enforcement of price gouging offences under the *Fair Trading (Australian Consumer Law) Act 1992* through a connection with the *Fair Trading (Fuel Prices) Act 1993*; and
- (3) requests the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation to:
- (a) inquire into and report on fuel prices in the ACT, including:
 - (i) current analysis of retail margins, terminal-gate prices and ACT versus surrounding market differentials, identifying whether the structural drivers identified by the ICRC and Select Committee in 2019 still exist;
 - (ii) whether measures implemented following the 2019 inquiry have been effective and existing arrangements for monitoring and responding to unusual movements in ACT fuel prices are adequate; and
 - (iii) whether existing arrangements for monitoring and responding to unusual movements in ACT fuel prices, including the ICRC and relevant legislated frameworks pertaining to fair trading legislation, are effective; and
 - (b) produce an interim report on initial findings by 3 December 2026, with full findings published by 26 February 2027 if it decides to conduct an inquiry.

We are moving this motion because it is just not fair that someone who lives in Richardson, Casey or Holt is forced to pay 10, 15 or 20 cents per litre more for petrol than someone Queanbeyan, Kalgoorlie, Broken Hill or Katharine. It is as simple as that.

It cannot be justified. I understand that there is a war on in the Middle East and that this has forced the price of oil to a very high level, but that is not what this motion is about. This motion is about the differential in price specifically between this jurisdiction and, like, 10 kilometres that way. Every time Canberrans fill up, they are reminded how much more they pay for petrol.

Higher fuel prices squeeze family budgets and small businesses alike. For families, every extra dollar at the bowser is money unavailable for groceries, bills or other essentials. For small businesses that rely on vehicles to serve customers and make deliveries, it is another operating cost. It is difficult to absorb, and it may ultimately be passed on.

The fact that, here we are, there is this line over there and once you step over there: 15, 20, 30 cents. It does not make any sense. The latest ACCC data puts Canberra at the top of the capital city petrol price table. In the week to 16 September, Canberra also recorded the largest weekly increase in average prices: 17.3 cents per litre. Over the

weekend, I drove around my electorate. I saw fuel prices nudging \$2.50 CPL for unleaded, \$3 for diesel.

For families who need their cars to get to work, take children to school and manage everyday life, that cost adds up quickly. I note that, in early responses to these matters, Mr Barr, among his suggestions, just suggested that people should just, you know, buy an EV. I do not know that it is that simple.

Now obviously, this Assembly, back in 2019, went through the process of establishing a select committee to examine fuel prices, and there were a number of things that the government said they were going to do. Some of them they have, and some of them they have not, but we are still in the same scenario. And I think it is really important that we establish exactly why.

And if indeed the comments from Rowan Lee from the umbrella organisation overseeing petroleum retailers are anything to go by—because of course he, in his submission back in 2019 and in additional comments since then, has suggested that the biggest driver is the fact that it is really expensive to do business in Canberra—if indeed that is the case, well, the government should be owning that. They should be owning it. And they should be indicating ways that they can address it.

I understand we have got a lot on today; I am not going to talk any more to this, but I commend this motion to the Assembly.

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage, and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (10.11): The government supports a committee inquiry into fuel pricing, and makes the point that we have always supported a committee looking into fuel pricing. I would like to start by addressing Mr Parton's selective quoting of both the 2019 select committee and his characterisation of the government's response. The government's response was to support a recommendation of the select committee to establish a permanent standing committee into market pricing, into price monitoring and into markets generally. If only Mr Parton were as selective in who he texts as he is in cherry-picking quotes.

The ACT government has been transparent and used the established processes of government to update the community, following the government's response. I know Mr Parton finds the day-to-day work of government boring, but I would have hoped that he would have at least paid attention to the committees that he was formerly a member of and checked on their work before bringing matters to the Assembly. I do acknowledge and appreciate that he has at least updated his own motion, overnight, to be more factual. The Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Fuel Prices 2019 report made five recommendations: establish a standing committee to monitor ACT fuel prices and competition; proactively approach independent operators when considering new ACT service stations; introduce a mandatory real-time price monitoring scheme modelled on NSW FuelCheck; improve public information and education on fuel prices; and compare service station operating costs in the ACT and other jurisdictions and identify options to reduce prices. The government's response agreed, in principle, to recommendations 1 to 3, agreed to 4 and noted 5.

The government supported examination of fuel market analysis and reporting to

improve consumer outcomes, although considered the ICRC better placed than the new Assembly committee to perform this role, given its expertise and resources. Treasury assessed extending NSW FuelCheck to the ACT and establishing an ICRC administrative monitoring and reporting function. In 2019-20, Treasury worked with New South Wales to assess extending FuelCheck to the ACT. The initial estimated costs, around \$1.1 million over the budget estimates, including a mandatory enforcement framework, was considered prohibitive. The 2020-21 CMTEDD annual report subsequently reported that an ICRC monitoring role was not pursued, because access to NSW FuelCheck data was too costly.

In 2020, COVID-related falls in oil and wholesale petrol prices were passed through nationally, but initially not to the ACT. The Chief Minister warned ACT retailers that the government could regulate petrol prices under the Fair Trading (Fuel Prices) Act 1993. Unjustifiably high prices persisted. Retail prices then fell substantially. In June 2022, the Chief Minister asked the New South Wales Premier to extend FuelCheck to the ACT free of charge, citing cost-of-living benefits for Canberrans and nearby New South Wales communities. In September 2022, New South Wales agreed to include ACT service stations at no cost to the ACT.

FuelCheck commenced in the ACT in late 2022, Following ACT-New South Wales treasury engagement with industry, retailer participation remained voluntary. The six-month pilot achieved more than 95 per cent participation. All ACT fuel retailers now participate. The ACT government continues to work with New South Wales on its scheme arrangements and promote FuelCheck before holidays and peak driving periods. Treasury continues to monitor fuel market outcomes using FuelCheck data, ACCC reporting and other market intelligence, and engages the ACCC during periods of significant price volatility.

So we can put to bed any suggestion that the ACT government has not continued to take action on the national and multinational corporations profiteering in this space or follow through on its commitments in 2019. We support the Assembly committee inquiry. As the Chief Minister said, in those hearings, “this is exactly the sort of thing that people want from their elected representatives, to stand up for them against particularly big business who are gouging them in this city”.

Prices are too high for Canberrans, and the drivers of those prices have already been explored in detail in the previous committee. It seems, though, Mr Parton has been too bored on committees for some time and he has forgotten the evidence provided to the committee he was a member of. I am wondering whether Mr Parton even flicked through the 2019 ICRC report. It has been interesting to watch his social media, where he has made arguments on behalf of the industry body representing petrol stations, quoting them directly. Rather than use evidence, Mr Parton has been parroting the people who have been profiting from Canberrans.

The key findings from the ICRC report on fuel pricing in the ACT were that nationally in 2018, around 90 per cent of the retail petrol price was wholesale cost, including excise tax, and only around 10 per cent was retail costs and margins. The higher annual average petrol price in Canberra than in regional areas largely reflects a higher retail margin and, to a lesser degree, higher wholesale petrol costs, not the cost of doing business. Canberra’s higher average net retail margin likely reflects weaker competition

in Canberra. This is due to Canberra having a more concentrated retail petrol market with a higher proportion of retailers with business models of offering a premium product and a lower number of independent retailers with a business strategy to aggressively discount.

Canberra's higher wholesale petrol costs likely reflect uncompetitive supply contracts of petrol retailers in Canberra with a high market share. Canberra service stations, on average, typically make larger profits than the average of those in the regional comparison locations. In 2017-18, the average net profit per site was around \$750,000 in Canberra, compared to around \$380,000 in regional comparison locations. We will always back consumers, while Mr Parton wants to cut taxes for Woolies, Coles and the other major retailers. For context, fuel suppliers have never made bigger profits. Viva Energy and Ampol, Australia's fuel refiners, have seen their share prices increase by around 50 per cent since the start of Donald Trump's war in the Middle East.

Our market is also changing. More Canberrans are driving EVs and hybrids and more people are driving fuel-efficient cars. We know that the Liberals are bizarrely and ideologically opposed to getting better kays to the litre—we are not. Less petrol and diesel is being sold overall, down from 312 million litres in 2018-19 to 282.7 million litres in 2023-24. When you layer in the population growth, there has been an 18.5 per cent reduction in the amount of petrol sold per person in Canberra. So the fixed costs of running service stations are being spread across fewer and fewer litres of fuel each year. If Mr Parton thinks that the solution is to open up new petrol stations all over Canberra for a product that is less and less in demand, he is demonstrating the Liberals' economic fundamentals for all to see.

We will continue to work with the competition commission and Treasury to support better outcomes for Canberrans against those who look to price gouge. We are supportive of the motion, because we have always been supportive of a committee looking out for Canberrans and making sure that our fuel retailers are not price gouging.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (10.19): The Greens support this motion and I thank Mr Parton for bringing it. We think this is definitely worth looking at. I am told the relevant committee in this case is the Economics Committee, which is most likely the best one to send it to. Central to this motion is the comparison to fuel prices in other cities. People can tell that something is not right when petrol costs more in far-flung mining towns like Broken Hill. These are places where well-worn arguments about higher costs due to greater transport distances and smaller populations completely break apart. The Canberra levy at the bowser is a real problem and it has always been a problem. It is a harsh reality that, when the profit motive is so powerful, the market will charge what the market can bear. It is within the nature of business to achieve the highest profits they can, and that is a balancing act between supply, demand and the perceptions of what they think they can get away with before provoking some kind of regulatory intervention in the market.

It is precisely what the Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission has been mandated to look at over the years. It is why we have a specific law for monitoring fuel prices for price-gouging practices—the Fair Trading (Fuel Prices) Act 1993. Just earlier this year, when we expedited legislation in the context of the international oil crisis, that legislation tightened up the connection with the Australian Consumer Law. I wrote

to the Commissioner for Fair Trading at the time, encouraging them to monitor closely for price gouging, and I got an encouraging reply. I had hoped all these efforts would have made a difference, but it is hard to see. I would like to know how the ACT government has used its powers that it currently has under that legislation in relation to price gouging. Has the ACT government used those powers and, if so, what effect did they have? A committee is well-placed to get answers to those questions.

I also thank Mr Parton for updating on the notice paper based on a lot of the conversations that we were having in the building yesterday and conversations that Mr Parton was having with others. I think the effectiveness of these reforms and the fair trading legislative framework will be looked at and it is extremely relevant to a lot of people in Canberra. In the mind of the community, this problem persists. There is a gap between what the government has concluded is fair competition and what the community sees as price gouging. This prospective committee inquiry will no doubt draw out the extent of that gap and allow government a mandate to make further interventions.

A keen eye to good and proper regulation will only become more important as our city electrifies. The fuel supply industry will inevitably phase down as electric vehicles continue to make up a higher proportion of the vehicles on our roads. That will not just be cars but also other modes of transport in Canberra's strategy of transport-oriented development: buses, light rail vehicles, e-bikes—and it was great to see e-cargo bikes finally get added to the Sustainable Household Scheme this week after years of campaigning from the community and from the Greens—scooters, and also, of course, we have active and public transport in other ways.

A critical role for government is looking out for people on the way through with these significant changes to our city and our way of life. Businesses need to know that, for anyone who tries to make a quick buck out of the people—particularly against those who, for entirely legitimate reasons, are still using petrol and diesel vehicles and for those who will use them for longer than others—such exploitation will not be tolerated.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (10.22): I am supportive of this motion, and I thank Mr Parton for bringing it to the Assembly today. This is clearly a problem—namely, that Canberra's fuel prices are the highest of all capital cities across the country. It is a problem not only for residents, for individuals and for families but also for community organisations, for taxi and rideshare drivers and for other workers whose income is directly impacted by these fuel price hikes without commensurate revenue increases or pay rises flowing through to them. I spoke with an Uber driver a little while ago when prices first escalated—they had gone up by about 30 per cent—and he indicated that Uber was charging a five per cent surcharge, which of course is not enough to cover the gap. He also indicated that only a small portion of the five per cent surcharge was actually going to him as the driver who pays for the fuel. So this does have an impact in all sorts of different ways.

It is concerning that the cause of our higher fuel prices here in Canberra seems to remain unclear. Of course, concerns have been raised that price-gouging practices may be contributing to this. Noting the passage of the Fuel Legislation Amendment Bill earlier this year, I am keen to hear of the effectiveness of the legislation and any actual impacts this is having on preventing price gouging here in the ACT and to know whether any

further interventions may be required to get a better deal for Canberrans.

As I have raised previously in this place, I believe that broader mechanisms to support Canberrans to use public and active travel options are essential to reduce reliance on an expensive and increasingly volatile commodity and also support fuel cost assistance that is means-tested to most appropriately support those in need who do not have another option. These measures should be pursued in conjunction with efforts to lower fuel prices—first, to understand why Canberrans are getting such a raw deal and, second, to keep us from getting gouged moving forward, because it is unfair that so many members of our community are getting screwed over at the bowser.

So I welcome Mr Parton bringing consideration of this to the Assembly's attention this morning. It appears it might come to the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation. So I look forward to participating in the committee's deliberations on whether to launch an inquiry into this matter.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Environment and Planning—Standing Committee Statement by chair

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (10.25): Pursuant to standing order 246A I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning in relation to E-PET-024-26 and PET-061-26 concerning access to general traffic in CIT Plaza in the Woden town centre. These petitions were referred to the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning on 12 June 2026 and relate to concerns about the ACT government's plan to allow general traffic to move through the West CIT Plaza in the Woden town centre. The petitioners called for the continued restriction of through-traffic in the CIT Plaza to preserve the value of the space for hosting social activities, events and gatherings.

Having carefully considered the petitions and the ACT government's response, the committee has resolved not to conduct a formal inquiry into the matter. The committee notes that it is currently undertaking an inquiry into the role and future of the Woden town centre in the context of a compact city, through which it has received evidence on a wide range of issues affecting the town centre, including on the future of CIT Plaza. In light of this ongoing work, the committee considers that a separate inquiry into this matter could be duplicative and is therefore not warranted at this time.

Statement by chair

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (10.26): Pursuant to standing order 246A, I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning, relating to petition E-PET 044-26, to protect the former Braddon Bowls Club site; a community, social and recreation site.

This petition was referred to the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning on 10 June 2026 and related to the development application for a six-storey hotel to be developed on the site. It called for the site to be retained for community, social and recreational purpose; and for the development application to be paused until an

assessment of community needs is undertaken.

The committee considered the petition at its meeting on 8 September 2026 and resolved not to inquire. This is owing to the committee already having inquired into the matter through its inquiry into DPA-07 - Former Braddon Bowls Club. We have already inquired into this matter. We have already reported back.

The committee encourages all those in support of the petition to read the committee's report into DPA-07.

Commission and Statutory Office Holders—Standing Committee

Statement by chair

MS LEE (Kurrajong) (10.27): Pursuant to standing order 246A, I make a statement on behalf of the Standing Committee on the Integrity Commission and Statutory Office Holders, relating to statutory appointments in accordance with continuing resolution 5A.

For the reporting period of 1 January 2026 to 30 June 2026, the committee did not consider any statutory appointments.

I now table the schedule of statutory appointments considered during this reporting period:

Integrity Commission and Statutory Office Holders—Standing Committee—
Schedule of Statutory Appointments—11th Assembly—Period 1 January to 30
June 2026.

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee

Statement by Deputy Chair

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (10.27): As Deputy Chair, and on behalf of the Chair of the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs, pursuant to standing order 246A, I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs relating to statutory appointments in accordance with continuing resolution 5A.

For the reporting period of 1 January 2026 to 30 June 2026 the committee considered a total of five appointments and reappointments to the following bodies:

- Legal Aid Commission
- Sentence Administration Board.

I now table a schedule of statutory appointments considered during this reporting period:

Legal Affairs—Standing Committee—Schedule of Statutory Appointments—
11th Assembly—Period 1 January to 30 June 2026.

Appropriation Bill 2026-2027

[Cognate bill: Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2026-2027]

Detail stage

Schedule 1—Appropriations—Proposed expenditure.

Justice and Community Safety Directorate—Part 1.5

Debate resumed from 22 September 2026.

MR SPEAKER: The question is that the proposed expenditure be agreed to.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (10.28): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the budget measures put forward under the Justice and Corrections Directorate for the 26-27 financial year. Firstly, to bushfire and extreme weather preparedness. When it comes to emergency preparedness, the ACT Greens have the view that good governments plan ahead. They look beyond the immediate budget cycle, and invest now to reduce the risks, costs and harms that the communities will otherwise face in the future. That principle is particularly important as we confront climate change. Canberra is already experiencing more frequent and intense heat waves, longer fire seasons, and increasingly severe weather events. As the forecast points towards another devastating El Nino summer ahead, preparedness is a necessity.

A budget is more than a statement of expenditure. It is one of the important tools available to government to manage risk. A good budget identifies the risks that communities face over the medium and long term, and makes the investments necessary today to reduce those risks tomorrow. That is why the Greens have consistently pushed to ensure that climate resilience, disaster preparedness and community safety remain firmly on the agenda.

We know that climate adaptation is a present necessity. Whether it is ensuring communities have access to safe refuges during extreme heat and bushfire events; strengthening emergency response capabilities; or keeping our city cool by increasing our urban forests, government investment in climate adaptation is crucial to extreme weather emergency preparedness.

Canberrans expect their government to be ready, and they vividly recall how crucial our frontline workers were to keeping our communities safe during the tragedies of the 2003 and 2019-20 bushfires and the COVID pandemic. Canberrans expect that, when emergencies occur, the systems designed to protect them will be properly resourced and capable of responding effectively.

That brings me to the Emergency Services Agency. Twelve months ago, the agency was undergoing a period of significant change, including a change in leadership. Meaningful cultural reform requires strong leadership, clear direction and sustained commitment from the top. The Greens supported the efforts to improve organisational culture and strengthen confidence within the agency because culture has a direct impact on service delivery, staff wellbeing and public trust. One year on, it is reasonable to

ask: how is that work progressing? What measurable improvements have been achieved and what challenges remain?

With regard to the ACT Ambulance Service, investment is crucially needed to address the significant workforce pressures that have been repeatedly identified by staff, reviews and surveys. The November 2025 ACT ambulance roster review found that an additional 83 full-time equivalent staff would be required to achieve a relief ratio of 1.87. Then, in March 2026, the ACT Ambulance Service workforce strategy acknowledged the need for establishing a clear methodology to monitor service health and inform an appropriate relief ratio.

Workforce shortages have consequences that extend well beyond staffing numbers on a spreadsheet. They affect the ability of staff to access leave, undertake specialist training, progress into advanced clinical roles and maintain their own wellbeing. Over time, those pressures contribute to burnout, retention challenges and declining morale. This is concerning, both because of the impact on the dedicated professionals working within the service, and because the workforce pressures ultimately affect the quality and sustainability of care available to the community.

During estimates, the government indicated that funding would be provided for additional staffing, including 26 paramedics, as part of a broader increase of 32 FTE. While that investment is welcome, it still leaves important questions unanswered. If the identified workforce gap is 83 FTE, what is the government's timeline for closing that gap?

How long will it take to recruit, train and retain the workforce required to place the service on a sustainable footing?

These questions go to the heart of ensuring Canberrans can rely on timely emergency healthcare when they need it most, and the ACTAS workforce is treated with the respect it deserves.

Mr Speaker, I also want to address the issue of ambulance affordability. Two years ago, the 2024 agreement between the Greens and Labor government included a commitment to investigate free emergency ambulance call-outs for people without private health insurance. This is an important equity measure. No Canberran experiencing a medical emergency should hesitate before calling an ambulance because they are worried about the potential financial cost.

During estimates, officials advised that discussions had occurred with other jurisdictions that have already implemented these free ambulance services. The conversations referred to appeared largely preliminary in nature, and I am disappointed by the limited progress that appears to have been made towards implementing a free ambulance scheme in the ACT. Other jurisdictions, including Queensland and Tasmania, have already demonstrated that free ambulance schemes can work.

Free emergency ambulance call-outs hold strong public support and remove a significant financial barrier to accessing emergency healthcare. It also comes with significant benefits to the ACT health system because people will not be delaying the call-out of an ambulance and hence being more likely to end up in a worse-off medical

state. Canberrans deserve to see this initiative moving beyond preliminary investigation and towards legitimate implementation.

In closing, on behalf of the Greens, I want to acknowledge and thank the many emergency service personnel who work tirelessly to keep our community safe. Whether they serve as firefighters, paramedics, emergency communications staff, volunteers or support personnel, they continue to perform with professionalism and dedication despite immense pressures and increasing demands. They deserve not only our gratitude but the resources, workforce support and long-term planning necessary to ensure they can continue to do their jobs safely and effectively. To all those who protect and support our community, thank you. Your service is deeply valued.

MS TOUGH (Brindabella—Minister for Human Rights, Minister for Community Services, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Women, Seniors and Veterans, and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence) (10.35): I am pleased to speak in support of the Appropriation Bill 2026-2027. This budget includes additional funding to enable security upgrades at the Alexander Maconochie Centre, transitional support for people leaving custody, First Nations justice initiatives, the Board of Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody, and legal and human rights services.

Turning firstly to corrections, the ACT's only adult correctional facility, the Alexander Maconochie Centre faces the same population pressures as our growing city. That is why this budget invests \$3.2 million to support the operation of the AMC, ensuring that we continue to meet the complex needs of detainees while maintaining safe and secure operations.

Delivering equitable justice outcomes is central to Closing the Gap and to our commitments to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Minister Paterson set out the government's commitment to this work in June, and I want to reaffirm that commitment under this budget. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander detainees often face barriers to successful reintegration, including complex mental health needs, housing instability, poverty and intergenerational trauma. In addition to ongoing funding for the Transitional Accommodation Program, the government will provide \$3.3 million to continue integrated case management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander detainees. This funding will support Aboriginal community controlled organisations to deliver culturally responsive reintegration pathways that help reduce reoffending, and improve outcomes for participants.

The government remains committed to ensuring appropriate technology is in place to support the safety and wellbeing of staff and detainees. The 2026-27 budget invests \$10 million to significantly upgrade the electronic security system at the Alexander Maconochie Centre, to provide additional cameras, and for scoping work to determine requirements for future wi-fi infrastructure. This lays the foundation for future work to support increased access to education and program content.

The 2026-27 budget also provides \$9.4 million to continue important programs which provide essential throughcare support to detainees exiting the AMC. This includes the continuation of the Justice Housing Program and Transitional Accommodation Program, providing detainees transitioning out of custody with safe, secure housing and

the wraparound services they need to rebuild their lives in the community. The government has allocated \$5.4 million to establish the Board of Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody at the AMC, which is expected to commence in February 2027.

And finally, Mr Speaker, I turn to my human rights portfolio. The ACT Government Solicitor's Office and the Human Rights Commission both play a central role in protecting the rights of Canberrans. The 2026-27 budget provides \$8.6 million to support human rights and GSO services, including within the Human Rights Commission's complaints team.

Mr Speaker, preparing a budget is no small task and while I was not involved in this year's budget, I am very proud to be part of bringing it to the Assembly. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the officials within JACS for their dedication and hard work through the 2026-27 budget process. I also acknowledge and thank my predecessors in these portfolios, Ministers Cheyne and Paterson, for the significant work they and their offices undertook in the lead-up to this budget prior to my appointment as minister.

This is a budget that supports safe and effective operations at the Alexander Maconochie Centre, funds transitional housing and throughcare programs for people leaving custody, progresses our commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander justice, and backs the services that protect Canberrans' rights. It is a budget that is good for our community, and I commend it to the Assembly.

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (10.38): I rise to make some comments on the ACT justice system and particularly the funding choices that government is making in the justice system. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge that there are some significant investments in this budget that are welcomed. I note in particular \$1.8 million to help oversee the justice system reforms, for independent advisors to support the implementation of the Jumbunna review, and to expand the capacity for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. However, I have been meeting with stakeholders who are unclear about how this funding will be used. Certainty would be welcomed.

I note the ongoing funding for community legal centres. These are key services in the universe of ACT justice that punch well above their weight. While the five-year certainty provided to these services is great, I understand there has been an overall net drop in funding and a failure to include CPI, so in one sense their budgets have been reduced. Why there must be such miserliness when it comes to these services, which are comparatively cheap and give us amazing return on investment in the justice system, I really do not know

Almost \$19 million is provided to boost the DPP, and this is welcome. This is particularly so given that we know that complex sexual assault cases have been increasing and are placing strain on the office. In relation to this, though, I note that there is grave concern—and this has publicly been stated by the Law Society and the Bar Association—about the lack of a corresponding increase in the funding for Legal Aid ACT, and, I would add, for other community legal centres. I recently went to the ACT courts to see the service that Legal Aid are providing with their duty lawyers and

their early intervention work—helping, for example, victims of family violence—and that work is invaluable. Underfunding has real results on the ground. That might be, for example, someone seeking a protection order not being able to get assistance when they visit court.

I note Mr Steel's commentary earlier in the week about the difficult choices that need to be made in a budget. As he says, budgets are about choices and priorities. MLAs and parties should articulate these funding priorities. Taking up that challenge, I want to make the point that, with the way funding priorities currently work, the government spends an extremely large amount of money on the justice system—hundreds of millions of dollars—and this money is primarily eaten up by courts, by policing services and by the housing of offenders in AMC. It is an ongoing and ever-expanding investment. This investment requirement is largely driven by government policy decisions. It is driven by the government's view on the kind of justice system it wants to operate and it is also driven by the timeframe over which the government is willing to invest.

Despite some excellent policies, such as raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, it remains the case that the ACT government still deprioritises and underinvests in programs and initiatives to reduce criminal offending and re-offending, to divert people from the justice system and to address the causes that lead to contact with the justice system. The alternative approach—one that invests in people, communities and prevention—is a justice re-investment approach. A justice re-investment approach prioritises investment in evidence based programs and services to address the social drivers of crime and imprisonment and reduce recidivism. The evidence is very clear that justice re-investment saves money. The evidence is also very clear that it is more effective, leading to a safer community.

Imprisoning people is expensive and it is also ineffective at reducing offending. Imprisonment, in fact, is a criminogenic factor. It increases the likelihood of further offending and contact with the justice system. Unfortunately, the ACT continues to facilitate, through its policies and investment choices, a system that fails to effectively lift people out of a cycle of incarceration. Instead, it manages these people in the justice system at great cost.

The most recent data shows that the average cost of housing a detainee in the AMC is almost \$600 a day per detainee, and that is over \$200,000 a year. Consider also the fact that almost half the people in AMC are on remand. These are people who are not convicted or sentenced but are waiting to access a trial. Adding to the concern is the fact that the average time that a person spends in remand in the AMC is 173 days, or approximately six months—on average, six months in the AMC, and sometimes without even being convicted. At the same time, we have had historical underinvestment in initiatives to relieve these problems. We have had insufficient housing in the Justice Housing Program. People are being refused bail and being put on remand due to a lack of adequate housing.

We somehow do not operate a generic bail support program that provides those on remand with an individualised case plan that deals with the underlying factors of their offending; We do not have a dedicated bail support program for young people, despite numerous recommendations. It is quite clear that the government is underinvesting in

justice re-investment. We can see this in the failure to meet the target to reduce recidivism by 25 per cent by 2025. It was a great and ambitious goal that did not receive the government support it deserved. 2025 has passed and the target has passed us by. I suggest the issue is not that there was no evidence base or plan, and it is not that the commitment was lacking at certain levels of government; the problem is the failure of government to prioritise its outcomes and invest accordingly.

This has been an ongoing problem. Lip service is not backed up. There is no shortage of evidence and plans. I am sure my colleagues will talk about the same failings in, for example, the climate change space, where the government has paid for its consistent lack of commitment by missing its 2025 emission reduction targets. The community will pay for that failure too.

We have a library of evidence and recommendations about justice re-investment in a whole range of reports. There is the Reducing recidivism in the ACT by 25 per cent by 2025 plan, the *Our Booris, our way* report, and the *Pathways to justice* report. Recently, we had the Jumbunna report, which very clearly points out that the government's lack of investment is the key reason for justice failures experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander over-representation in our ACT justice system has grown significantly, by 27 per cent since 2017. It is much higher than the national average and is the highest in Australia. Nearly nine in 10 First Nations men in prison in the ACT have previously been imprisoned. It is a real tragedy and a real failure. Again, to explain this failure, we need to look at the ACT government's budgets and funding priorities. There has been a failure in dedicated, targeted and consistent investment to address this problem. We have seen some, but barely enough support is given to community based early intervention and prevention programs and services, and the patchy and under-resourced nature of this investment is telling.

It is not that there is no evidence or solutions or even a lack of good intent. The ongoing issue is that there simply is not adequate prioritisation in investment. It is also not clear that the government's policy agenda is consistently supportive of a justice re-investment approach. I note the previous efforts of now Minister Paterson, who has been, but is no longer, the corrections minister, to change the ACT Bail Act to remove the presumption against bail for various driving offences. That is a change that was described by the previous Attorney-General as negatively impacting on the ACT government's justice re-investment efforts, being contrary to our commitment to reduce Indigenous over-representation in the justice system, as being inconsistent with the ACT's principled approach to bail, and as lacking evidence. ACT Legal Aid's comment on Minister Paterson's proposal was that the likely consequence would be an increase in remand. Remandees, as we know, already make up almost half the ACT prison population and are remanded for an average of six months.

(Second speaking period taken.)

In fact, Legal Aid and community legal centres provide another example of government-skewed funding priorities. These legal services are incredibly cost-effective in terms of their ability to deal with issues upstream from the justice system, to help people and to save money. Importantly, they provide access to justice. Economic analysis has determined that community legal centres deliver an average

cost-benefit ratio of one to 18. This means that, for every \$1 invested in services provided by a community legal centre, \$18 of benefits are generated for the community. Anyone who has considered a budget business case knows that this is a very impressive cost-benefit ratio.

But it is not just about economics. Every time a person cannot get access to these services, there is a reduction in access to justice. We see these legal services struggle to gain minimal funding, often only year to year, and they must battle with unmet demand at the coalface. It is a pattern of funding where there is a failure to invest early, and the result is poor outcomes for the community and, often, higher and spiralling costs down the road.

I will mention the response of SAPR—the Sexual Assault (Police) Review—as another example of this. That review was very concerning and found that there were serious deficiencies in ACT Policing’s response to people coming forward with allegations of sexual offences. It made 28 recommendations to the ACT government to improve the way sexual offences are responded to and perpetrators are held to account, and to ensure that victim-survivors’ experiences of the criminal justice systems are timely, respectful, and responsive. The government response at the time was very serious and acknowledged the gravity of the findings. The problem is that the review was released by government in April 2024. It is now September 2026. The funding to implement the response to that report has not been sufficient to address issues in a timely way.

Operation Foster, which is the ACT Policing’s dedicated re-investigations team, was required to re-investigate 170 cases of sexual assault. This was very important to give victims justice after the review identified issues with the police response. The review made a very sound point that appropriate resourcing of ACT police, and other agencies across the criminal justice system, such as Victim Support ACT, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre, Legal Aid ACT, and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, will ensure that all victim-survivors whose cases were dealt with in the review receive an equitable, best practice and multidisciplinary response.

I discussed this with the minister, ACT Policing and others at estimates, and, as at today, 86 of those 170 matters have been finalised, so we are unfortunately only halfway through the list, and that is a matter of resourcing. Policing and other agencies can only address the backlog with the resources they are given. What that means is that the victims are waiting years on top of the years that they have already waited to have their matter resolved, and that is not good enough.

Lastly, I give credit to the various reforms and investments that the government is making and has made. As I noted, raising the age of criminal responsibility is a fantastic nation-leading justice re-investment measure. The Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List, which we established some years ago, is not only helping turn around people’s lives but also producing a positive benefit-cost ratio. A report recently showed that, in 2022 and 2023, it saved nearly \$10 million per year in avoided costs of custody, reduced recidivism, and avoided costs of crime, outstripping the cost of the court itself. What a perfect example of justice re-investment, where we are diverting people into support and treatment for the benefit of the community, and, at the same time, saving money for the budget—a win, whichever way you look at it. That is the type of focus we need in the justice space: a justice re-investment approach that both saves money and

achieves these beneficial community outcomes.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (10.54): A lot can be spoken to in this portfolio, but I am keen to focus on just the government's funding of the AMC board of inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody. First of all, I want to give a shout-out to Julie Tongs, CEO of Winnunga, for her relentless advocacy over a decade to try to get this over the line, and to Joe Hedger, who worked hard on this particular push and worked closely, and continues to work closely, in supporting affected families and making sure their voices are reflected in this place and the work of the government.

In 2008, the AMC opened as the first Australian prison to be designed, built and operated under human rights legislation, with a mandate for rehabilitation and re-integration. Since then, though, the ACT has led the nation, not in that respect but, instead, with some shameful statistics: the largest Indigenous incarceration gap in the country; the worst levels of recidivism in the country; and the highest rates of racial prejudice experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. And there have been multiple Aboriginal deaths in custody, occurring at a hugely disproportionate rate compared to population.

A prison sentence should not be a death sentence, but many Aboriginal detainees and their families are terrified that it is. That is why last year I called for a board of inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in the AMC. I was pleased, despite some initial pushback, that this call was ultimately supported unanimously by the Assembly. I was again very pleased to see funding in the budget review, with further funding in this budget, to allow the board of inquiry to commence.

It is important that this inquiry is informed by the experiences of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, and by those who have lived experience in the Alexander Maconochie Centre, either personally or through the incarceration of their loved ones. It is also important that the inquiry is comprehensive, run by an appropriately qualified board and given the priority it demands without any unnecessary delay, so that its findings can immediately inform practices and policies, and so that the AMC can ultimately deliver its intended mission as a human rights prison that rehabilitates and re-integrates inmates to live fulfilling lives in our community post release, with First Nations families no longer fearing that, if their sons, brothers, sisters or daughters end up in Canberra's prison, they might not make it out alive.

I welcome the government's \$5.37 million commitment to deliver the board of inquiry. I thank the outgoing Minister for Corrections and her office for working with me and my office collaboratively, and, more importantly, with stakeholders on this. I look forward to working with the new Minister for Corrections on this important piece of work. I also want to thank her for the collaborative spirit she has brought to the portfolio so far, including in our discussions regarding the inquiry. I am pleased to see it set to kick off. I am very pleased with the top-up funding that was included in the budget line item as well, and am happy to support it.

MRS MORRIS (Brindabella) (10.57): I rise to speak specifically on community safety, police and emergency services. I often say that keeping the community safe is one of the most important duties of government, because safe communities enable human flourishing. But crime in Canberra is spiralling out of control. Years of poor policy

direction, poor planning and underinvestment have left our police and emergency services on life support. A growing number of Canberrans no longer feel safe in their homes, in their communities or even in their local shopping centres. According to a Roy Morgan survey, more than 50 per cent of Canberrans are concerned about crime in their community. We heard their stories and we have shared their stories in this place.

We have heard the stories of young mothers who are being encouraged to take self-defence classes after their homes have been targeted by brazen criminals. We have heard the stories of parents who do not feel safe using parent rooms in our shopping centres because of antisocial behaviour and other behaviour. We have heard the stories of innocent Canberrans who become the victims of repeat violent offenders who are at large in our community on bail. We have heard the stories of retail workers who confront antisocial and criminal behaviour in their workplaces on what seems to be a daily basis.

I think of a bottle shop in my electorate that has been routinely targeted by repeat offenders. Almost every day, brazen criminals walk into the bottle shop with balaclavas on and a suitcase in toe, and they help themselves to whatever they like off the shelves while retail workers and shoppers sit by and watch, in fear for their own safety. Clearly, safety has been denied to them in these sorts of instances. One retail worker told me that the first thing that she does when she goes to work is assess her exit routes in the event that another criminal comes through the doors and she might need to make her escape. This is the Canberra that this Labor government is building.

A growing number of Canberrans have had enough. They are sick of it. They know how stretched our police are and they are scared for their safety in case the help that they need does not arrive in time. They are even talking about taking matters into their own hands. There is no clearer indicator that the social contract between government and the people is under enormous strain when members of the community lose confidence and lose trust in the institutions that are there to protect them, and when they believe that they must rise to their own defence to protect their family.

This is a dangerous situation. It is a situation that can quickly spiral out of control if the government does not act, and I fear that it is just a matter of time before an innocent Canberran is seriously injured or even killed. This did not happen by accident and it did not happen overnight. This is the product of 25 years of Labor policy that is soft on crime, soft on criminals and unprepared to take meaningful investment in our police and emergency services.

ACT Policing's own figures show that violent offences against a person, including homicide, assault, grievous and actual bodily harm, sexual assault, and kidnapping, have gone up by 29 per cent over the decade. And, over the same period, investment in local policing per head of population has gone backwards, from \$532 to \$523. This decrease in per-head expenditure has been matched by a decrease in the number of sworn police officers per 100,000 residents, from 173 to 169 over the decade. While every other jurisdiction in Australia has increased their investment in policing, the ACT is the outlier. This Labor government has gone its own way and at great cost to the community, who are now telling us that they fear they will have to take matters into their own hands.

This government is taking Canberra in the wrong direction and it must stop. Our police do extraordinary work under extraordinary pressure. Every day, they confront danger to keep us safe, and, overwhelmingly, they do that with a great sense of professionalism, courage and duty, but they are overworked and they are being stretched dangerously thin. The service is being held together by overtime and the goodwill of our police, with thousands of hours of overtime per month, which contributes to stress and burnout in an already demoralised workforce.

I have repeatedly raised concerns about the squalid conditions of our police facilities, which have been beset with floods, leaks, sewerage contamination—you name it. Our officers deserve safe workplaces, and victims of crime deserve appropriate facilities when they seek help from our police. If the government had diligently dealt with these issues as they arose, Canberra would not be confronted, as it is right now, with the major capital works required to appropriately accommodate our police. Labor has wilfully left this problem to fester over years, making the job to safely accommodate our police so much bigger and so much more expensive.

Sadly, that is not where the troubles end for our dedicated police force. This government asks them to confront danger at great personal risk and with their hands tied behind their back. Labor's weak, permissive legislative environment has enabled organised crime to establish their operations here, in Canberra, in the nation's capital. Labor has decriminalised hard drugs and refuses to introduce anti-consorting laws to crack down on organised crime.

Members of outlaw biker gangs have described Canberra as the place to come and do business. It seems the Labor Party are very pro-business when it comes to organised crime. If only they could be pro-business when it comes to supporting local businesses. This what a Finks bikie member said:

Canberra has become a safe haven for bikies, and the Finks were the first to exploit this. It's literally happening under the government's nose, but nothing is being done.

Canberra is the destination of choice for criminal bikies to hold their annual meetings, and this is a considerable diversion of resources for our police, who are required to babysit bikies whenever they come to the capital to hold their annual meetings, plot their criminal operations and recruit new members to their movement.

Successive ACT Chief Police Officers have indicated their support for anti-consorting laws, but Labor still refuses to take the necessary action needed to keep this community safe. Many people are asking why. Is it because of the reported links between outlaw bikies and the CFMEU? I do not know. Is it because of the links between the CFMEU and the Labor Party? I do not know. Is it because of the corruption that we have seen flow, stemming from the former Deputy Chief Minister's office? I do not know. *(Second speaking period taken.)*

But what I do know is that this Labor government refuses to take the necessary action needed to keep the community safe. Just last week, the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police issued a blunt warning: illicit drugs are fuelling organised crime and violence, and are a growing threat to our national security. That was the

Commissioner's warning. This is what she said:

Part of the conversation needs to be collectively louder about the dangers of illicit drug use and linking it to the organised crime violence in our communities and the impact it is having on our national security.

Labor's decriminalisation of hard drugs is sending the wrong message to the community and to criminals. They are effectively telling the community it is okay to use dangerous hard drugs, and they are telling organised criminals that Canberra is open for their business. Seven people have tragically died in suspected drug overdoses in Canberra in the space of just one month, with opioids suspected in every case. And, in August, ACT Policing caught 88 motorists with drugs in their system during a targeted testing operation. This is excellent policing work, and I really want to acknowledge them for the job that they have done.

Let's look at the numbers that ACT Policing have released with their roadside blitz. The numbers are truly staggering and deeply concerning. Police conducted more than 24,000 breath tests and detected 72 drivers with alcohol in their system. They conducted more than 400 drug tests and detected 88 drivers with drugs in their system. That indicates that around one in five drivers are drug impaired, compared to around one in 330 over the alcohol limit. Please bear in mind that that is only from drugs that can be tested and detected. These tests do not pick up all drugs. One in five drivers are drug impaired.

Labor's drug decriminalisation is failing. It is sending the wrong message to the community and to criminals. Canberra deserves a government that will take community safety seriously and give police the tools they need to get on with the job. Only the Canberra Liberals are prepared to do that. Only the Canberra Liberals will decriminalise hard drugs like meth, and only the Canberra Liberals will crack down on organised crime by having anti-consorting laws.

The systemic pressure on our police ripples throughout the community, from the member in the community who urgently needs help to the 000 call centre, where the number of calls being answered on first presentation has plummeted 10 per cent in just one year, to the broader emergency services system, where police, paramedics and fireies work in solidarity so that they can help each other plug gaps and fill holes to keep Canberrans safe. Canberrans should be able to trust that, when they call for help, help is on the way. That is a very basic expectation.

Like a policing safety emergency, a health emergency does not wait for a convenient hour. It does not wait until a shift is fully staffed or until a roster gap is filled. It strikes when it strikes. In those moments, Canberrans expect that the Ambulance Service is ready to respond, but there is a growing crisis that is injuring our paramedics and placing the lives of Canberrans at risk, and that is persistent understaffing and subsequent closures of ambulance stations.

Our paramedics, our ambulance staff, carry an enormous burden on behalf of this community. They walk into uncertainty every day, and they do so, like our police, with professionalism, courage and a deep sense of duty. Much is asked of them because the stakes could not be higher. When we talk about their services, we talk about matters

pertaining to life and death. The 32 additional Ambulance Service roles in this budget is welcome, but the reality is that it is just not enough. It is not enough to keep the system running. The Transport Workers' Union has warned that the announced ambulance staffing would still leave a substantial shortfall.

During the estimates process I asked the minister about the new Molonglo emergency services station, which is due to come online this month. At that stage, the government could not say whether the Ambulance Service would be able to operate from the new \$66-million station. We have a brand-new station without the paramedics needed to run from it. This is like an episode of *Yes, Minister*, only we are not living in a TV show; we are living in the real world, where the lives of people in our community depend on our fully-operational Ambulance Service.

Transparency is key to this issue. The Canberra Liberals have compelled this government to publish quarterly data on station closures. The first report that they presented showed that stations were forced to close 42 times in three months, amounting to 260 hours of lost coverage in the community. We know that a handful of clinical cases have been or are being reviewed to assess the impact of closures on that care, but the government has refused to disclose information on that, despite an Assembly order to do so. The minister has publicly indicated in the media, in the Assembly and in the estimates process that the government is considering permanently closing ambulance stations in Canberra. So, rather than adequately staffing them, Labor's response to avoid station closures is to permanently close them.

We expect that the minister will demonstrate that recruitment will deliver enough people to sustain the roster and properly staff new facilities. The budget papers estimate a median priority 1 ambulance response time of 11 minutes for 2025-26 against an eight-minute target. For someone waiting beside a seriously ill family member, those minutes really do matter. Paramedics have told the Canberra Liberals that they are burnt out, they are stressed, they are demoralised, and they are worried about what will happen to members of the community if they cannot reach them in time. I share their concerns.

If we ask our police, paramedics and firefighters to fight for us, then we must be prepared to fight for them too. That is exactly what the Canberra Liberals will do. Like our police and paramedics, our firefighters respond to the call of duty with selfless dedication, courage and professionalism, and they too are being stretched and their wellbeing is being tested. Staff complaints about bullying, harassment and inappropriate behaviour are increasing, while the number of staff accessing the Employee Assistance Program has tripled since 2022-23, from 19 to 59 as at March 2026.

Our firefighters are being asked to fight fires with unreliable and faulty equipment. The issue-plagued \$1.9 million electric fire truck has been off-road for repair for at least three quarters of its life. Firefighters have slammed safety flaws in the truck, including motion sickness, a lack of airbags, and noise levels that are so high they cannot communicate with each other when called out. As for the rest of the fleet, seven of our 17 urban pumpers are at or are reaching the end of their operational life, and another two are off-road for repair, according to a response to a question on notice I received in April this year. Despite all this, our firefighters always step up when needed, and that

means they have to sacrifice personal time with their families to work almost 7,000 hours of overtime per month.

In 2016, ACT Fire & Rescue feverishly responded to an unsustainable annual overtime bill of \$4.1 million. A decade on, that bill has doubled to \$8.2 million. Collectively, our police, paramedics and firefighters are working, on average, more than 15,000 hours per month in overtime. That is an annual overtime bill of almost \$20 million just to keep our emergency services running, and stations are still being closed due to staff shortages. This is an alarming indicator of a workforce under stress because of long-term failure in workforce planning, recruitment and training.

The fact is that the Labor government have not just passively watched the decline of Canberra's police and emergency services; they have actively created it through systemic underinvestment and poor workforce planning. Our police, paramedics and firefighters need a government that understand that without them, without their services, there is no community safety. That means backing them with adequate resourcing, strategic workforce planning, modern technology, equipment that works, and facilities that are safe and fit for purpose, because, if we ask our police, paramedics and firefighters to fight for us, we must also fight for them. That is exactly what a Canberra Liberals government will do, because the Canberra Liberals will always stand up for the people who protect us.

Lastly, community safety also depends on what happens inside the Alexander Maconochie Centre. In June, the Auditor-General found that ineffective rostering and staff shortages were leaving education programs and activities posts unstaffed, while officers worked longer shifts in overtime. How does the government expect to deliver effective rehabilitation under these conditions? Our corrections officers deserve support to do their jobs properly. When we fail to address offending behaviour inside the prison, we risk further victims outside of it.

If the evidence received from the corrections officials during estimates is anything to go by, we should all be very concerned. In response to my questions, the Commissioner of ACT Corrective Services, Leanne Close, confirmed the system was under pressure with overcrowding and a high proportion of inmates on remand. She also told us that at least 10 different gangs are operating in the jail, including outlaw motorcycle gangs, and that they are using the prison to recruit members. I am concerned that this jail is creating more gang members and releasing them into the community than it is taking out of the community. That is a real perversion of outcomes. Canberrans deserve a corrections system that helps break the cycle.

I wish I could say that this budget has filled me with confidence and that all of the issues that I have just canvassed would be addressed—and they are just some issues; there are many that I have not gone to in this speech—but clearly they will not be. Only the Canberra Liberals understand and are prepared to fight for a safer Canberra, and that means fighting for our police, our paramedics, our firefighters and the broader corrections system.

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for City and Government Services, and Minister for Transport) (11.22): Well, if there were any more hyperbole in this place, it would probably need its own budget

allocation. But let me focus on the most egregious remarks in this component of the budget debate, which occurred yesterday. They were Ms Barry's remarks delivered by Mr Cain. Those criticisms had one thing in common: loaded language was repeatedly asked to do the work of evidence. Let's start with the so-called "captain's pick". A captain's pick suggests one person choosing alone—the captain picks. That is not the process for judicial appointments.

Under the published 2026 arrangements, a direct recommendation can proceed only where the candidate satisfies the published merit criteria, accepts nomination and has the express endorsement of the ACT Bar Association, the ACT Law Society and the relevant head of jurisdiction. Without every single one of those endorsements, the direct recommendation pathway is not available—it fails; it effectively vetoes. The appointment is then made by the executive only if all three of those endorsements are received. Of course, the ordinary expressions of interest pathway remains available under the very same instrument. A published process is not a secret process, let alone a frightening one, as was described yesterday; a recommendation requiring three separate institutional endorsements is not one person choosing alone, however many times Ms Barry might say it is; and a different process is not, merely because someone objects to it, an improper process.

The chronology matters too. I have to say that I am getting really tired of having to correct the Liberals over and over on their dates. Dates are a point in time and you can usually research them. Anyway, Chief Magistrate Walker's retirement was announced on 19 December. Her final sitting day was 27 March this year. An announcement of a future retirement is not the date on which the office becomes vacant. Yesterday we were invited to compare that process with the later Jon White process, including, remarkably, a suggestion that its roughly 70-day duration somehow included the Christmas and New Year period. But it did not. The government announced on 9 April that expressions of interest would shortly be invited for the further Supreme Court vacancy. Mr White's appointment was announced on 19 June and he commenced on 22 June. April to June does not include Christmas, the last time I checked. So, if we are going to construct an argument around elapsed days, just get the calendar right as a useful starting point.

Nor was Justice Muller an untested candidate waiting outside the judicial system—he had already served as an acting judge of the Supreme Court—and Justice Taylor was already a serving Supreme Court judge, and their appointments were announced on 9 April. When the further Supreme Court vacancy arose from Justice Taylor's appointment as Chief Magistrate, the government used the other pathway: an advertised expressions-of-interest process that resulted in the appointment of now Judge Jon White SC. So, within a matter of months, both pathways were used in different circumstances. That really rather complicates the claims so emphatically put that the purpose of the new arrangements was to avoid competitive processes.

There was a further point: that these appointment processes somehow caused or exacerbated the court backlog. But no evidence was presented yesterday identifying a sitting day lost because of the appointment process. Ms Barry, through Mr Cain, conveniently forgot that the court does not sit in January. No delayed hearing was identified and no causal analysis was provided separating the appointment process from caseload, case complexity, adjournments, party readiness or the availability of acting judicial officers.

When we turn to the similarly loaded assertions that were made in relation to the Parliamentary Counsel's Office, there were very serious suggestions of the deliberate stifling of private members legislation. The words used yesterday were that the government had unfettered power over PCO's resources and that it had become virtually impossible for opposition members to obtain drafting. But what was actually produced by Ms Barry, through Mr Cain? What were the receipts? It appeared to be selective quotes, for one—and, even then, it was evidence that drafting can be extensive; evidence that it takes time; and evidence that a specialist drafting office has finite capacity. Evidence of workload is not evidence of political interference.

The PCO's own published service standard says it drafts legislation for individual members of the Assembly as promptly as competing commitments allow. It maintains confidentiality. Its published arrangements assign particular Deputy Parliamentary Counsel to oversee drafting for different groups of private members, to keep the confidential nature of those requests separate. The record in this place—despite what Ms Barry would try to have you believe—shows that plenty of other members are able to bring amendments and bills into this place—plenty of non-executive members. You are one of them, Mr Deputy Speaker.

But what is most appalling is that what Ms Barry did yesterday, through Mr Cain, was not a fair contest. The PCO cannot come into this chamber and explain the instructions it received. It cannot publicly describe how complete those instructions were, how complicated a proposal became, what deadlines were requested, how much time they were given, what changed during drafting or any other confidential context that might explain an exchange—nor should the PCO, because the dealings are confidential. To do otherwise would undermine their professional discipline and their integrity. The thing is: I cannot come in here to defend it either. I do not have the context. For the exact reasons of confidentiality, I have no idea what Ms Barry is referring to. It would be improper for the PCO to share that with me. Parliamentary privilege is a profound protection. With that protection comes a corresponding responsibility—something that members opposite, including their deputy leader, seem to have forgotten. The shadow Attorney-General yesterday, in those remarks, misused protection to launch allegations against an office that cannot defend itself, because it is honouring the very confidentiality owed to the member making the allegations.

There is a particular cowardice in exploiting PCO's professional discipline and integrity, using privilege to make the accusation, using selective, confidential correspondence to support it and then relying on the PCO's own ethical standards to ensure that no answer will be given. I am, frankly, disgusted. Members who make serious allegations should possess the courage to make them fairly. That means acknowledging the missing context, respecting confidentiality and directing political criticism towards the people who are actually able to respond. Parliamentary privilege is intended to protect the fearless pursuit of truth. It should never become cover for attacking those whose public duty requires their silence. Ms Barry's remarks placed professional drafters, just an incredible team, in the political firing line while denying them the ability to provide any context. I call on Ms Barry to withdraw those remarks in this chamber and to formally apologise to the PCO—and, frankly, to grow up. If they are not meeting your standards, raise it with them; pursue it with them—and not just come in here and do what I have to say is one of the most egregious abuses of this

institution that I have seen.

Then we come to the budget itself. It feels like I have taken a long time to get there—well, so did the shadow AG. Once we got past the diatribe about non-budget items, I actually found myself wondering what budget Ms Barry was debating yesterday. The criticism bore remarkably little resemblance to the budget actually before the Assembly. Some of the investments described as “vague” or “absent” are plainly set out in the budget papers. For example, this budget invests almost \$19 million in the DPP. It supports 24 ongoing positions, converting 10 temporary positions to ongoing roles, adding 10 prosecutor positions, including a Crown Prosecutor, and providing four additional Witness Assistance Officers; it provides \$2.154 million over four years for Legal Aid ACT to continue to provide grants of assistance to vulnerable and low-income applicants, including \$1.5 million in this financial year, alongside a sustainability review of its longer-term funding needs; there is more than \$16 million over four years for key community legal services, including Canberra Community Law, the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Women’s Legal Centre ACT as well as Care; and it provides over \$5 million in net capital investment, together with \$2.5 million in recurrent and depreciation support to modernise critical court and tribunal case management infrastructure, including the Jury Management System and the Coroner’s Court local management system, and commencing work on a core case management system. The budget statement separately identifies those as “priority”.

The budget does not cease to contain an investment, because somebody has overlooked it and disagreement with the budget measure does not make the measure disappear. Scrutiny is welcome, but getting the facts wrong does not make the criticism stronger; it just makes it wrong. Calling a process “frightening” does not make it improper; calling workload “deliberate stifling” does not make it political interference; and calling an appropriation “invisible” does not make it disappear. I commend this component of the budget to the Assembly.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Health and Community Services Directorate—Part 1.6

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (11.36): I rise to make a few comments about the health budget. Health now takes up one-third of the budget, and most of that consists of hospital costs. The ACT Greens understand the need to ensure that our investments in the area of health are efficient and effective. We recognise the significant work that has been done to negotiate arrangements with the commonwealth that has resulted in additional investment. We recognise, however, that our role as a significant regional centre means that our health system will continue to have pressures placed on it. The ACT Greens believe, however, that a significant contributing factor to the current situation and the ever-growing health expenditure is short-term thinking that focuses on immediate problems at the expense of long-term solutions.

It is understandable that we have ended up in this situation. Preventative health is not sexy. There are not as many ribbon-cutting opportunities as there are in acute care. Any preventative health can be very broad, with overlaps in the disability, housing, employment, cost-of-living, environment and education spaces that make it hard to define and compartmentalise into the silos that we so often like to work in. In a tight

budget situation, an understandable knee-jerk reaction is to cut spending and only spend on what is thought to be absolutely unnecessary—that is, acute care. But this approach does not address the root causes of our widening health budget and, by neglecting it, we ensure that the problem will only worsen.

It might seem counterintuitive, but we believe that, in order to dig us out of the budget hole we are currently in when it comes to health, we should spend more in the short term to be able to spend less in the long term. This means that, rather than funding hospitals at the expense of primary and preventative health, we would provide adequate funding for both hospitals and primary and preventative health simultaneously in the short term so that in the long term we can eventually see less demand for hospitals. One of the significant challenges of this budget is that it has seen the pulling back of relatively small amounts of funding in preventative, primary and public health, which has seen a significantly bigger impact than reducing larger funding amounts in the acute healthcare system. The benefits of this for people's health and consequently for their quality of life would have been even greater than the benefits of the approach to the health of our budget. It might be hard to quantify the number of lives and livelihoods saved as a result, but there will be lives and livelihoods saved. That is beyond any doubt.

On that note, we would also like to get modelling done to quantify how much we could potentially save by investing in various preventative health measures so we know what measures are well worth investing in. There is a long list of primary and preventative health services that we already know are good value, and deliver important services to the community and need to be funded. These include harm reduction services—how can we support people to come off alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, if we do not have sufficient funding for these services?; education for young people on vaping and smoking—how can we prevent people from becoming smokers and vapers, if we do not deliver education about them?; non-clinical in-home palliative care services, not just the clinical services, so that people can end their lives and have their needs and basic dignity looked after; multiyear funding for sexual health and family planning, so that service providers can focus on providing those important services, rather than spending big chunks of their time trying to secure funding every year; more safe havens—we have been promised more but we have not seen more delivered; and more residential aged-care places and respite care. —despite this being a commonwealth responsibility, it is the ACT government that picks up the hospital tab when there are not enough residential places to be discharged to, and the ACT population suffers. That is why the Victorian government have chosen to invest in building and redeveloping residential aged-care services. They did not have to, but they recognised it was a smart thing to do. We could do the same.

They also include a government-run GP clinic, so that doctors do not have to worry so much about the finances of running their bulk-billing clinic and could spend more time with their patients, addressing complex cases and providing continuity of care; more GPs for specialist interests—as they are helpful for getting the waitlist for specialists down significantly; more funding for Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations in the ACT, so that First Nations people have easier access to culturally-safe health care; and a mother and baby perinatal psychiatric ward now, as most other states and territories have, so that people can get treatment for acute mental illness, without being separated from their baby. While this is in the forward estimates, there is a need for it right now. These services are currently not funded, or not funded

enough. But the more we fund community health-based services to look after people, when and where they need it, fewer people will end up in hospital, and that is good for everyone.

We would also do a range of things that would result in better health for people across the board. This includes banning gambling ads as well as ads for alcohol and junk food. These all have significant impacts on people's health—and, if you can ban ads for tobacco, why not for these sectors as well? We would invest more in more solutions for planetary health, to protect our population from the health impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and the environmental toxins that are increasingly link to a plethora of illnesses, from cancer to motor neuron disease; and end our support and our complicity in wars that are also major contributors to environmental pollution and climate change and impact people's health.

When it comes to health, if you are kicking the can down the road, the can will only get bigger with time. The ACT Greens see an increased investment in primary and preventative health as not just a smart economic move but also an investment in the most important asset anyone has—their health. It is a logical, sensible and compassionate approach, all at once. We urge the ACT government to see the big picture and realise the power it has to make a difference, not just now but into the future.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (11.44): I rise to speak on the Health and Community Services Directorate and the important role it plays in supporting some of the most vulnerable members of our community. At a time of significant fiscal pressure, it is more important than ever that government expenditure is focused on delivering measurable outcomes for individuals, families and communities. We must be confident not only that programs are well-intentioned, but they are genuinely improving lives.

One area we must continue to do better is improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Despite years of commitments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain over-represented in the child-care protection system. The government has commissioned numerous reviews, inquiries and reports, but the true measure of success is whether those recommendations are being implemented and whether outcomes are improving on the ground. We need clear reporting, accountability and evaluation of progress, not simply another cycle of reviews and strategies.

Domestic, family and sexual violence continues to place immense pressure on frontline services. Demand for victim-support services is growing, and the community rightly expects that people seeking help can access services when they need them. Funding is important, but so too is the coordination of services. We need better integration between justice, housing and community-support systems, so that victim-survivors do not have to navigate a fragmented system, during the most difficult periods of their lives.

I also want to highlight the transition to Thriving Kids reforms. Successful implementation will require more than structural change. The government must identify any service gaps that emerge during the transition and ensure that vulnerable children and families do not fall through the cracks. We must avoid creating fragmented pathways that make it harder, rather than easier, for families to access support. Early intervention only works when services are accessible, coordinated and adequately

resourced.

Mental health remains another critical challenge. While significant investment has occurred in recent years, many Canberrans continue to experience difficulty accessing timely support, particularly for early intervention and community-based services. The government must ensure that mental health funding delivers a system that is responsive, integrated and focused on prevention as well as crisis responses.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the vital role played by the community sector. Many services funded through the directorate are delivered by non-government organisations that provide support to families, people with disability, victim-survivors of violence and those experiencing disadvantage. These organisations are increasingly facing workforce pressures, rising operating costs and growing demand. If we expect the sector to deliver critical services on behalf of the government, we must ensure funding arrangements support long-term sustainability. Short-term funding and uncertainty make it harder to retain staff, plan services and deliver the outcomes the community expects.

In considering this budget, we should be asking a simple question: how will this expenditure improve outcomes? How will it improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, better support victim-survivors, strengthen mental health services, deliver the Thriving Kids reform successfully and ensure a sustainable community sector? These are the measures against which this expenditure should ultimately be judged.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (11.48): I rise to speak to the budget outputs of the Health and Community Services Directorate in my capacity as the ACT Greens spokesperson for young people, disability, women, the community sector and LGBTIQ+ issues.

With federal Labor announcing \$16 billion worth of cuts to the NDIS in April, the period between federal and territory budget announcements was one of anxious anticipation for many in our community. People heard they were set to lose supports by 1 October under the new changes and heard nothing of substance about the alternatives meant to replace them. Federal Labor's budget pushed Canberrans with a disability into freefall, and the natural question that followed for many was: will the ACT government be ready to catch me? This is what this year's budget had to do, and I am sorry to say that it has not. While the cuts were drastic and in many ways shocking, the ACT government's responsibility to establish a system of foundational supports was not something that emerged on the day of federal budget—in other words, it was not a surprise. For many years, we have known that foundational supports were going to play a greater role in the ACT disability supports landscape. In the 2024-25 budget we got reassurance from the ACT government that they understood this too; \$90 million was set aside that year for the planning, implementation and roll-out of foundational supports.

Yet since then our calls for transparency on where this \$90 million will go, or has already gone, have been largely ignored. The common response we have received is that things are beyond the ACT government's control or ability to prepare for, with territory choices hanging in the balance of commonwealth decision-making. At the risk

of sounding blunt, the ACT Greens reject this reasoning. This is because, firstly, we knew these changes would have huge impacts at the territory level and information was available for the projected scale of impact. Secondly, we know that ACT Labor knew this too. I say this because the ACT government set aside \$1.4 million to “sustain key disability organisations as NDIS reforms finalised” in this year’s budget. At the time of the budget announcement many key disability advocacy orgs, including the ACT disability caucus, did not know where this funding was going nor how the ACT government had determined it would be enough to sustain key disability organisations in light of federal cuts.

We have since received some more broad information about where this money will go through the government’s update on Thriving Kids. However, there is still no readily accessible info on how the government determined this amount of money would be sufficient. Out of the context of \$8.6 million spent on the horseracing industry, I am more than doubtful that this is a fair or substantial investment by the government. I call on the ACT government to transparently outline how this figure of \$1.45 million was reached and what metrics it has used to judge that it will be enough to achieve its own goal of sustaining key disability organisations, because the reality is since June we have seen multiple Canberran services for people with a disability shut down—Community Options, Carers ACT. The real kicker is that we have never needed these services more because in less than two weeks funding for social, civic and community participation supports and for capacity-building daily activities will be cut by up to 50 per cent.

I speak now in my capacity as the ACT Greens spokesperson for women. I would like to welcome my fellow member for Brindabella Ms Caitlin Tough to the women and community sector portfolios. I am looking forward to working constructively with her and her team. With the women’s plan finishing up this year, I am looking forward to the development and announcement of the new plan to achieve gender equity in the ACT. I am hopeful, nine months in, that the consultation on the plan will not only be extensive but will ensure that the directorate is appropriately funded to conduct that work. I hope when it is complete the plan has teeth and funding. I have heard from the sector that the previous plan did not meet their expectations. The finalisation of the new plan would be a great opportunity to introduce a new strategy with bold policy changes and reforms, with the support of the experts in the field. It would be great to see the new plan highlight the current gaps in healthcare treatment.

Historically, women—trans and cis—and gender-diverse people have significantly more barriers than men when they go to a GP. Medical misogyny is not just an issue in the ACT, but there is more we can do to make it equitable here. There is currently a select committee looking into women’s health in the federal Senate, which was established earlier this year. The terms of reference for the committee include experiences of medical misogyny and long-lasting pain conditions, and I would encourage anyone listening in to send in a submission if you have lived experience in this area. I had the privilege of sitting on the ACT inquiry into endometriosis and other pelvic pain conditions, where we received quite incredible submissions that really highlighted the gap in the ACT. I wanted to thank Ms Tough for her work in establishing this inquiry. In my private capacity I look forward to the recommendations that will come from this inquiry.

I will speak briefly to domestic family and sexual violence. Given their disproportionate

impact on women in our community, I submitted a question on notice during estimates to get a list of all of the programs that have had funding ceased for this year. Minister Tough outlined that funding for eight programs previously funded by the Federation Funding Agreement on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses 2023-2025 ceased on 30 June 2026. I understand that the government is focused on frontline emergency services in this budget, and that is incredibly important. However, the cessation of these particular programs does concern me because the majority of these programs focus on the prevention of or services that respond to domestic, sexual and family violence within culturally diverse and First Nations communities. Without any funding to replace these programs, organisations will have to make some difficult decisions on if they can sustain programs from their own pocket. It should not be an either/or, and the government should be willing to fund the whole cost of eliminating domestic, sexual and family violence in our community.

Speaking now in my role as Greens spokesperson for the community sector, not-for-profit organisations and community services in Canberra have been struggling. With the significant cost-of-living pressures, housing insecurity and lack of mental health support, Canberrans now need more help than ever. Without increased government investment, the community sector has inevitably been the one covering the gap. The sector has had to adapt to a multitude of increasing costs, pressures and demands, like the cost of living, the housing crisis, financial stress and mental health pressures. Our population has grown and so has the amount of people who need help. Employment costs have gone up, insurance costs have increased significantly and when community organisations identify a systemic problem and want to ask government to do something about it, where organisations are forced to spend more on overheads whilst government maintains the same level of investment, they have less to spend on frontline services.

In 2021, when ACTCOSS released their *Counting the Costs* report, much of the burden that the sector had been carrying was amplified. It revealed significant employee stress and burnout as they did everything in their power to meet the rising tide of community need. When I have reached out to these frontline organisations, they stressed to me their concern for the increased demand of their services. They also highlighted that there is a change in demographics for the people seeking support. For example, there has been an increase in households seeking emergency food relief that have two working parents. The very nature of emergency food relief is that people receive it when they need it, and then they get back on their feet and no longer need that service. But we are in a time when two working parents cannot afford to get food to feed their family. How are these households expected to get back on their feet when they are both already working and their wages do not cover the essentials? Among these cost pressures, there is also now an increase in the price of fuel. Our most vulnerable Canberrans who are travelling to use these support services now may not even be able to afford to travel there. As demand increases and demographics shift, government funding has not kept pace. The sector has experienced years of chronic underfunding that led us to breaking point earlier this year.

I presented a motion in March calling on the government to increase their investment in the sector and introduce better policies to support the employees in these organisations. We backed ACTCOSS's \$20 million figure as an appropriate investment to fully support the sector and make up for over a decade of underfunding. My motion

called for a change in the indexation formula to address cost pressures and demand, to progress parity of working conditions between community sector and public sector workers through multi-enterprise bargaining, to assist organisations to upgrade their facilities and to make contract renewal decisions at least six months before their end date. We managed to get an agreement on some of these essential policy changes, but there is still more that can be done.

The government announced that they would be refreshing the Social Compact from 2012. As a framework for the relationship between government and community organisations, it will be so important to address contract indexation, insurance, long service leave, longer term contracts for all organisations and parity between the public services and community sector employees under the MEA. I am eager to work with the minister on stewardship of these essential reforms to see these initiatives progressed.

I will say it before and I will say it again: we all know intuitively that people are less likely to end up in an ED if they see a GP. *(Second speaking period taken.)*

And they are less likely to end up homeless if they get rent assistance when they need it, but that is so hard to measure. You are not going to be able to easily count how many ED visits never happened because people got their lump checked out at a family practice. Nevertheless we know investing in these preventative services does two things: it helps people earlier before things get awkward for them, and in the process it also saves government a whole lot of money because it takes pressure off the acute services that they deliver directly. If we want to ensure value for money, investing in community services meets that requirement.

In June, with the Greens motion and major community pressure—full credit to them—the government finally released this year’s budget, where they have proportionally spent more on community services than they have since 2009. We think this is a great step. It has given the community sector breathing room and finally a lifeline. However, we will be expecting that this level of investment is maintained and keeps pace with better indexation so that the community sector does not continue to fall further behind. The government will continue to see the value of community sector organisations and invest in them adequately. The funding is better, and good indexation will ensure it is sustainable over time.

Speaking now in my capacity as LGBTIQ+ spokesperson for the ACT Greens, we have long prided ourselves on being the capital of equality here in Canberra, and we should be proud that we have been leaders on so many legislative reforms. The hard bit now is the year-by-year work, providing consistent funding to support our queer communities. This May, in the lead-up to the budget, the government proudly announced that they were investing \$894,000 in continued and expanded funding to support services and advocacy for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans. While, as with any funding for our queer communities, it is of course very welcome, I would note that the vast majority of this funding does fall into the continuing rather than the expanding category. To be clear, the two continuing programs are absolutely vital for large sections of these communities, and I will speak to them in a moment. But in a time when queer communities need support we need to go beyond shiny announcements of existing programs.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQA+ Advisory Group is particularly important to ensure the government understands the experiences of First Nations queer folks, not just a whitewashed or colonial understanding of sexuality and gender. I hope that through this group the government continues to work to ensure full inclusion of First Nations queer identities, such as brotherboys and sistergirls, in the broader Canberra rainbow community.

Young people exploring and coming to terms with their gender identities are increasingly doing so in an environment where their identities are weaponised, and it can seem like allyship is becoming harder to find. I do appreciate the recognition from this budget that we need both direct support for trans and gender-diverse people but also for those around them. A Gender Agenda, or AGA, does a particularly great job here in supporting these communities through both crisis support and through services like the Gender Pathways navigation service. I was really pleased to hear of renewed funding to AGA for this service in the form of \$688,000 of indexed funding over the next four years, but I would reiterate that organisations like AGA need to be communicated with throughout these funding processes.

To be completely frank, it just is not good enough that weeks after the budget, as we heard it in the estimates, AGA still had not received their funding and indeed did not know when and even if they would receive it. Community safety workers cannot be expected to provide services to the best of their ability when they do not know how long they will continue to have a job. This in turn has an impact on those who rely on these supports. I am glad this was later clarified and AGA did receive its essential funding, but when the government and, more importantly, communities rely on organisations like this to provide services like these, there simply must be better communication.

I will now finally speak to the budget outputs for young people. I will begin by acknowledging the obvious and repeatedly discussed point during budget estimates: this year's budget had zero funding for the development of an overarching ACT youth strategy. This is disappointing for a number of reasons: firstly, because it was a 2024 ACT Labor election commitment to develop and deliver this strategy and, secondly, because, while strategies can be really frustrating when the government fails to actually fund and action them, not developing them in the first place when you said you would is guaranteeing poor outcomes. As you have not set any outcomes to work towards, to let another year pass without this funding sends a pretty clear message to young people about how likely their needs are weighted in government policy decisions. On a practical level as well, the lack of an overarching strategy makes me doubtful of how effective our cross-directorate initiatives can be at capturing the needs of young people.

The key case for this is the youth homelessness strategy, which we also did not see dedicated funding for in this budget. The youth homelessness strategy, according to my motion earlier in the year and the unanimous will of the Assembly, must involve collaboration between CYF and Housing ACT to ensure that issues with out-of-home care and housing application processes are being addressed. We heard clearly in estimates from the official visitors that young people from out-of-home care and those experiencing homelessness struggle greatly in applying for Housing ACT properties because they do not have a rental history or the independent life skills which the application criteria necessitate. The official visitors stated clearly that in order to address this a response from both Housing ACT and CYF was required, as our motion

called for. You can see why it is problematic that we have got a housing strategy but no youth strategy when we have systemic issues which require policy solutions from both directorates working together. Of course, it is young people being left out of the picture.

The intersection of housing, young people and homelessness is real and pervasive. It is an intersection that goes directly to a question of whether young people can afford to live in this city or not, whether there are proper systems in place to catch them when they are faced with family and domestic violence and when young people have no choice but to be in care whether there are proper supports for them to live a full life and transition to independent living as they grow up. The government likes to talk a lot about economic development goals, which young people contribute to, from international students to young workers and so on, but I think we need to think more critically about how we currently have a system that is actually letting young people down and making it extremely difficult for many to build a life at all.

I want to speak to a few things for young people which needed attention in this budget, and I have drawn heavily from the Youth Coalition's budget response. I thank them for their continued work advocating for young people. Their therapeutic support panel has had a hugely positive impact for young people, alongside raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. It is extremely valuable and something we need to keep investing in if we are able to continue seeking positive outcomes. However, the budget indicated a \$1 million saving under the forward estimates. I think the government needs to assure the community that these savings do not come at the cost of the therapeutic support panel's growth or continued ability to support the young people who need it.

I also want to speak to the continued implementation of Our Booris, Our Way. The government has identified supporting the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee as a priority for HCSD in this budget, including its work towards completing implementation of the review's recommendations. I want to reaffirm the Greens' strong support for this work. Reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care and reducing the number of children being removed from their families and communities could not be more important and must be a priority. More than a stated priority, it should be clearly funded action. The government has spoken of \$22 million in this budget of funding to deliver key critical services for vulnerable children and young people with complex needs and has indicated that some of that money will be used to support the implementation of the recommendations of Our Booris, Our Way.

However, it remains unclear exactly how much of the funding will actually go to the implementation oversight committee and therefore whether it will go far enough for children and communities who need it. I am seeking clarity from the minister on exactly how much money is being invested to support this work. If the continued implementation of Our Booris, Our Way is being funded from a different allocation, then I ask the minister to make clear how much is being provided, what that funding will deliver and where we can expect to find it in the budget papers. More broadly, I ask for clarity around what the services being funded by this \$22 million are.

The funding for youth mental health has largely come from rollovers in the recent budget. However, I would like to echo the Youth Coalition's budget response and their call for a satellite child and adolescent mental health services clinic in Gungahlin. While

there is a CALMS clinic in Belconnen, the team faces significant capacity pressures, which have resulted in extensive wait times. As these services provide much-needed support to Canberrans, there is a pressing need to increase the capacity of this team. In addition, families in the Gungahlin region represent a high number of referrals. There is an ever-increasing requirement for the physical presence of CALMS in Gungahlin to reduce the barriers to education for young people. We hope that the government can confirm the establishment of these reforms and the use of existing funding to support them.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (12.08): I rise to respond on the Health and Community Services Directorate and particularly focus on the work being undertaken through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. This is an area where appropriations debate is particularly important, because when we talk about funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, we are not simply talking about programs, grants or another line in the budget; we are talking about whether government is actually delivering on its commitments to self-determination, to Closing the Gap and to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans. The government's own strategic plan says it wants to drive policy reform to enable self-determination, provide oversight of its commitments under the ACT agreement and Closing the Gap and work in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body and the community. These are important commitments, but the question for this appropriation is: what do those commitments actually deliver?

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body has an important role in providing a democratic voice to First Nations people in the ACT and advising government on policies and programs that affect their communities. That means the relationship between government and the elected body cannot simply be about consultation after decisions have already been made. The government has strategies, action plans and advisory structures in the elected body and the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. It has funding appropriated through this budget. The question is whether all of those things are producing measurable improvements in people's lives, and that is particularly important because Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are intended to play a greater role in delivering services.

The government says the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation Establishment and Expansion Fund is intended to build the capacity and sustainability of ACCOs in the ACT. It is an important investment, but, again, the government should be able to demonstrate what that investment is achieving. Are organisations being supported to grow? Are services becoming more accessible? Are communities having greater control over the services designed for them?

This is the broader point that I have been making throughout this appropriations debate. An appropriation is not an outcome. A program is not an outcome. A strategy is not an outcome. The government has to demonstrate what the money is actually delivering, and that is particularly important in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, where governments have made commitments over many years. We should not measure success by the number of meetings held, documents produced or programs announced. We should measure whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans are seeing better outcomes and greater control over the decisions that affect their lives.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business and Industry, Minister for Arts, Creative Industries and the Night-Time Economy, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (12.11): The 2026-27 budget will better support children, young people, families and our community members from diverse backgrounds. As Minister for Children, Youth and Families and Minister for Multicultural Affairs, I am pleased to outline some of the key investments in my portfolio areas.

The ACT Labor government is investing more than \$23 million in additional funding to support the safety, stability and wellbeing of children and young people who are unable to live safely at home, ensuring they continue to receive the care, therapeutic support and specialised services they require. Children and young people in out-of-home care have often experienced significant trauma, abuse and neglect, resulting in mental health challenges or complex behavioural needs. Every child is different, and this budget provides the highly specialised, tailored responses they may need. We are also conscious of the need to deliver these outcomes efficiently. That is why we are working with Treasury on rebasing and sustainability assessments to establish a long-term funding model that better reflects demand, complexity and the contemporary needs of children and families in care. We will continue to invest in prevention, early intervention, family support and contemporary models of care, which the hard work of our child protection workforce does each and every day.

The government continues to invest in a more therapeutic, culturally responsive youth justice system. Guided by our commitment to Closing the Gap target 11 to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in detention by at least 30 per cent by 2031, we are progressing the Youth Justice Strategic Plan, shaped by the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement's phase 3 action plan, because youth justice reform must be culturally informed. Key to this plan is embedding our nation-leading minimum age of criminal responsibility reforms, diverting children from the youth justice system into therapeutic care. This budget continues that work with ongoing investment in the Therapeutic Support Panel and \$412,000 in 2027-28 for the Safer Youth Response Service, plus \$561,000 in security and infrastructure upgrades at Bimberi Youth Justice Centre to maintain a safe, therapeutic, human rights-compliant environment. Our child protection and youth justice systems exist to keep our community safe, respond to children and young people in crisis and support families who need it most. This budget continues to invest in evidence-based reform in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Canberra is the proud multicultural capital of a proud multicultural nation, and I know Canberrans will not put up with a government that fails to back our migrant communities. We will back them each and every day. This budget continues supporting refugees, asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants through the family settlement assistance grants program and the Humanitarian Funding Program, with \$285,000 helping new arrivals secure housing, food and basic living expenses, including those escaping war and conflict.

The budget also provides an ongoing funding uplift to the National Multicultural Festival, investing over \$17 million over four years. The 26th festival alone generated an estimated \$22.8 million in economic benefit. I would like to thank the thousands of

community members, stallholders, performers and volunteers who make it a defining celebration of our city.

Across all of my portfolios, I am proud to be a part of the government delivering for the Canberrans who need it most.

MS TOUGH (Brindabella—Minister for Human Rights, Minister for Community Services, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Women, Seniors and Veterans, and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence) (12.15): I am pleased to speak in support of the Appropriation Bill 2026-27. This budget invests in stronger community services; additional support for vulnerable Canberrans; action to prevent domestic, family and sexual violence; and initiatives that improve outcomes for women, seniors and veterans and their families across our city.

It is a budget that recognises the important role community organisations play in supporting Canberrans every day, while also providing certainty and stability to the services people rely on. Turning first to the community sector, the ACT government recognises the significant cost pressures experienced by community organisations over recent years. These organisations are trusted partners in delivering services that support some of the most vulnerable members of our community, and we know that a sustainable sector is essential to meeting the needs of Canberrans now and into the future.

That is why this budget delivers an ongoing community sector funding uplift of \$5 million per annum. This builds on the \$10 million funding boost already provided to eligible organisations and complements approximately \$327 million in government funding across the sector. This investment provides greater certainty for community organisations and recognises the critical contribution they make to the wellbeing, inclusion and resilience of our community.

Cost-of-living pressures continue to affect many Canberra households. We have seen growing demand for food-relief services and Emergency Material and Financial Aid services over recent years, with community organisations responding to increasing levels of need. Our community sector rises to the challenge, but to support these services, the government is investing an additional \$1.25 million over the next two years. This includes additional funding for Emergency Material and Financial Aid services, as well as support through the Food Bank Fund. This investment will help ensure that Canberrans experiencing hardship continue to access timely assistance when they need it most.

This government remains committed to advancing gender equity and improving outcomes for women, girls and gender diverse people. The budget provides ongoing support for the implementation of the Period Products and Facilities (Access) Act 2023, and in this financial year, this school term, all ACT public schools will have period product dispensers installed, helping ensure students can participate fully in school and addressing barriers created by period poverty. Having a period should not stop you from participating in everyday life.

This year also marks the conclusion of the ACT Women's Plan 2016-2026. The government is now developing the next plan for women, girls and gender diverse

people, which will be informed by a broad community consultation and guarded by the newly established Women's Advisory Council for Gender Equity. I am having some early conversations in that work at the moment, and I am really looking forward to what comes next in that space for our community.

The women's budget statement highlights a range of investments that improve outcomes for women across areas, including health, safety, housing and access to services. On that note, this morning, I have been out at the seniors expo talking to a range of stallholders and seniors in our community around what government can do to support them and what services are out there for our seniors and their families.

This budget also is important because preventing domestic, family and sexual violence remains a key priority of this government. The 2026-27 budget invests an additional \$47.8 million over four years to support implementation of the ACT Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy and its first action plan. Importantly, this includes ongoing indexed funding from 2029-30, providing long-term certainty for victim-survivors and the services that support them.

A total of \$44.2 million over four years will support frontline domestic, family and sexual violence services across the ACT. This includes continued support for organisations such as the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, the Canberra Rape Crisis service, EveryMan and YWCA Canberra, alongside programs that support children and young people, priority communities and men's behaviour change initiatives. The budget also invests in system-wide improvements, including workforce capability, risk assessment training, information-sharing arrangements and prevention initiatives. These investments will strengthen our response to domestic, family and sexual violence, while supporting our long-term goal of ending violence in our community.

This budget also includes measures that support older Canberrans and veterans. Community sector funding will help organisations continue delivering services that support older people to maintain their health, wellbeing and independence. The budget also includes additional cost-of-living support, with increases to the Police, Fire and Emergency Services Levy rebate for pensioners and the continuation of vehicle registration discounts for ACT seniors cardholders.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank many teams across government and especially those in the Health and Community Services Directorate who contributed to the development of this budget.

I acknowledge the community organisations, advocates and service providers who work every day to support Canberrans and continue to partner with government to deliver positive outcomes for our community. I have really enjoyed meeting with so many community organisations from across different parts of our community, hearing what they are doing and hearing how this additional funding is going to make such a difference to the programs they deliver and the lives of Canberrans.

This is a budget that strengthens the community sector. It supports people facing hardship, advances gender equity, invests in the prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence and improves outcomes for seniors and veterans. It is a budget that supports a stronger and more inclusive Canberra, and I commend it to the Assembly.

MS ORR (Yerrabi—Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, Minister for Disability, Autism and Neurodiversity, Minister for Housing and Homelessness, and Minister for Equality) (12.21): Mr Deputy Speaker, in the 2026-27 ACT budget, the ACT Labor government is delivering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans through investments that strengthen self-determination, support community priorities, increase community control and progress our Closing the Gap commitments. Appropriately, initiatives across government that advance the health, wellbeing and life opportunities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans are led by my ministerial colleagues in all portfolios, but especially in health, education, justice and corrections.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander budget statement gives a good sense of the broad range of these initiatives, and I look forward to continuing to chair the policy subcommittee of cabinet for Closing the Gap, attended by the Elected Body, as we strengthen and support action across government.

This budget strengthens the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body as the representative voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans, and a key partner in government decision-making, by investing \$1.8 million in the 2026-27 financial year to expand the capacity of the Elected Body's independent secretariat, to strengthen oversight of justice system reforms and to support implementation of the government's response to the Jumbunna review.

This investment will fund two independent justice advisers and ensure the Elected Body has the capacity to engage effectively with government, provide informed advice and represent community priorities. This funding also includes support representatives from Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and the United Ngunnawal Elders Council to work with directorates and the Elected Body to identify priorities for implementation in the context of the significant reforms already underway.

I am pleased the budget also includes ongoing funding to continue initiatives in areas of the justice system the community has identified as a priority through the Jumbunna review phase 3 priority actions and the 2025 Elected Body hearings recommendations. Strengthening these governance structures will support the Elected Body to operate as an effective partner to government and drive improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans.

We are advancing our commitment to truth-telling and cultural recognition through a \$754,000 investment over two years from 2026-27 for the Truth Telling Project, recognising the longstanding and significant contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have made to the cultural, social and civic life of our region.

The ACT government believes it is vital that we document and recognise these contributions, and the project will support understanding of the history, presence and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT and surrounding region, building a stronger evidence base to inform future government policy and practice.

We are taking a community-led approach to truth-telling that reflects local priorities

supports cultural recognition and strengthens understanding across our community, beginning with an oral history approach that reflects communities' readiness for truth-telling. With these investments, we are delivering on government commitments, responding to community priorities and strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership recognition and wellbeing.

Mr Deputy Speaker, through our Capital of Equality Strategy 2024-29, the ACT Labor government is continuing our work to make Canberra the most welcoming and inclusive city in Australia for LGBTIQ+ people. We are proud of Canberra's reputation as the capital of equality, but that reputation is something we have to keep earning. It means continuing to back our LGBTIQ+ communities with Labor's practical action and investment.

That is why this budget provides \$894,000 to deliver the next stage of work through the second action plan, and we are investing in the LGBTIQ+ community-controlled services by funding A Gender Agenda's pathways peer navigation service and expanding the Supporting and Strengthening LGBTIQ+ Communities Program by delivering dedicated services for LGBTIQ+ parents, carers and children.

This budget also ensures the ACT will continue to be a nation leader on addressing period poverty and stigma, as we invest in the ongoing implementation of the Period Products and Facilities (Access) Act 2023.

Mr Deputy Speaker, our government remains focused on delivering local responses to national disability reform commitments arising from the NDIS review and disability royal commission. This budget continues investment in community organisations and services that support people with disability, their families and carers, while strengthening the sustainability of the ACT community sector, and it makes significant funding available for the implementation of Thriving Kids, the first phase of foundational support.

The budget also includes additional funding to support the viability of local disability organisations as they respond to national disability reforms, recognising that a sustainable disability sector is critical to supporting people with disability in the ACT and ensuring we have the right foundations in place for future implementation of foundational support. In addition, through the 2026-27 budget, homebuyers eligible for the Disability Duty Concession Scheme and eligible NDIS recipients will now no longer pay any duty, regardless of the price of the property.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to take a moment to address some of the comments that Miss Nuttall has made within her debate speech, particularly around foundational supports. I will pick up on the first part. Miss Nuttall has made the point a few times, recently that I have noticed, that of the \$90 million dollar provision for foundational supports that was put in place following the 2023 national cabinet decision, the government cannot say how that money will be expended.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to very clearly put this on the record, for the avoidance of doubt of all members of this place: the \$90 million provision was put in place off the back of the national cabinet decision in 2023 in full knowledge that that money would be subject to intergovernmental agreements between the commonwealth and states and

territories for future foundational supports.

It was not put in place with an agreement to spend it however we would like at any point. I have said many times in this place—and it is not an excuse, and it is not a deflection, and it is not the government not being ready—that we need to make sure that we have those decisions in place. They are decisions of national cabinet, and they have not been made outside of Thriving Kids. We will continue to work through and provide the detail, as I have been doing to this chamber, on how the provision is being spent, when we are in a position to provide that detail because those decisions have been made.

The risk, if we go ahead spending all this money prior to signing up to those agreements, is that we commit money to things that will not be required under the agreements or relevant under the agreements. Given the strong feedback we get from the chamber about making sure we are using money wisely, I dare say that would probably not be quite the wisest use of this funding.

I would also like to pick up on the comments around the October 1 start date and how everything should be aligned to this. I completely acknowledge that the federal bill comes into effect from 1 October, but not everything within that bill will take effect from 1 October. I think that is an important point that would be good for all members to take on board, because this is a progressive and staged response as we are doing a progressive rollout of Thriving Kids, in what are very complex reforms with many components in different parts. I think to say that everything should be ready on 1 October, when there is still a number of matters to be worked through and details to be considered, is actually just going to create a cause for alarm that is, quite frankly, not helpful, and it is harmful to a lot of people who are feeling, and rightly feeling, very vulnerable right now.

The point has come up on the participation supports and the changes. While my understanding is that the minister now has the power under the federal bill to set amounts for different supports within NDIS plans, I would make the point that, in changing that, plans still need to go through plan reviews and assessments, and those are not all going to happen immediately on day one, October 1. Again, I think we really need to be a little bit more considered and less alarmist in putting out this idea that everyone is suddenly going to see everything disappear at a moment in time. We will continue to work through this.

There are also a number of programs coming in under the reforms, such as the reforms of the ILC and the new community grants funds that the federal government is doing, which will go to broader systemic change as part of these other components. I would encourage everyone to look at the whole picture and not just pick up on components and present those out of context.

The other part that Miss Nuttall brought up that needs to be addressed is the funding that is in the ACT budget for the key organisations for sustainability. This funding is specifically for advocacy groups, noting that they are doing a lot more advocating at the moment around all of the reforms that are in place—so assisting with the additional workload that they have taken on. And the pilots are there for general foundational support, specifically going to areas in the ACT where we know that we would want

information and we would want community-based peer support. So we are working through with a few key organisations as to what that could look like. It is not permanent ongoing funding.

And this amount—in answer to Miss Nuttall’s question as to how the government came up with this amount—is to do that trial to sustain some key groups that, in particular, would usually get their funding through ILC grants but, with the reform of that program, need a bit of help to get through from where we are to where we are going, and also for the ACT government to get a good understanding of how we could deliver those broad-based foundational supports within our community that really go to that information and that initial peer-based area. We will have more to say on those, and I am sure if Miss Nuttall has more questions on this, we will be able to answer them in due course, once we have worked through this with a few of those key groups.

This funding is not there to sustain every single disability organisation in Canberra. There is a range of reforms going on and there is a range of impacts being seen across the community. That does not necessarily mean the ACT government is in a position to step in and continue business as usual for every organisation in Canberra. And I would make the point that business as usual might not necessarily be the best option either. A number of these reforms are because business as usual was not working appropriately, and we needed to take a different approach. A key example of that was the call from a number of community organisations, which we have heard over several years, that in moving into the NDIS, there was no provision for block funding for those key foundational supports, such as peer-to-peer supports and general information, and that the funding models that are available on an individual user-pays basis actually are not sustaining those groups. So while the answer might seem to be switch out like for like, I would dare say if we are switching out like for like and it is not working, that is not a very good outcome and, again, not a very good use of our money.

We will continue to work through these reforms. I would ask that everyone be very balanced in their consideration of the whole context and stay focused on how we can actually deliver a good ecosystem of supports for Canberrans through these reforms and in building an ACT disability service system. I note the time, Mr Deputy Speaker; I could speak for a lot longer, but I will leave my comments there.

This year’s budget delivers for Canberrans through a significant investment in initial foundational supports, strengthening supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans, and progressing equality for our LGBTIQ+ community.

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

Sitting suspended from 12.34 to 2.00 pm.

Questions without notice

Palliative care—services

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, last week I asked you about the scope, delivery and timing of the new Acute Palliative Care Unit at Canberra Hospital. You took those questions on notice and, at that stage, were unable to provide the Assembly with basic details about the project, yet yesterday the former

Minister for Health repeatedly stated on ABC Radio that the new Acute Palliative Care Unit is opening very soon. Minister, are you now in a position to provide the Assembly with the details you were unable to provide last week, including the scope, number of beds, budget and expected opening date of the new unit?

DR PATERSON: I will take it on notice, as I said last week.

MR PARTON: Minister, if the former minister is able to publicly state that the unit is opening very soon, why were you, as the current minister, unable to provide the Assembly with that information when asked last week and now?

DR PATERSON: Because I am the new minister in this portfolio area. The Deputy Chief Minister has extensive years of experience in this portfolio area and has overseen these projects, so she obviously has a very detailed knowledge base of these projects. I am weeks—I do not know how many—in the portfolio area, so I am required to get briefings on all these things and only have a basic understanding of some of these things.

MR CAIN: Minister, does the former minister know something about this project that you do not know, or can you now confirm to the Assembly that the new Acute Palliative Care Unit will be delivered in accordance with the government's original commitment?

DR PATERSON: Yes; we are delivering the new Acute Palliative Care Unit. That is a priority and I can absolutely confirm that. The questions that Mr Parton asked last week went to technical details about the budget, the time frames and the beds. That is what I took on notice.

Mr Parton: On a point of order: Mr Cain's question was very specific about whether the new Acute Palliative Care Unit will be delivered in accordance with the government's original commitment, not whether it will be delivered at all.

DR PATERSON: And I said yes.

MR SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Public schools—funding

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, yesterday in question time when asked about cuts to school budgets, you said, "There have been no cuts." Minister, has your directorate made changes to the SRA funding formula that will mean schools across Canberra will receive less funding than they did in 2026—yes or no?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: There have been no cuts to the education budget for our public schools. Individual schools, as we have been very clearly saying for some weeks, will see ups and downs in their school budget between the 2026 school year and the 2027 school year. We have been very clear about that from the start. What I have also been clear about is that the Education Directorate will be working with each school and with each principal to ensure that any transition to a lower budget—any budget reduction—can be managed to ensure that the school is safely staffed, that students, teachers and LSAs are appropriately supported and that our students are getting an

excellent education in all of our public schools.

This was always going to be an iterative process. Again, I thank all of the principals and school leaders who have participated in this process. I also thank the small team in the Education Directorate, who have been working on the basis of the best information that they had available to them but were very clear with school principals and with the union that they did not have all of the information and that is why they needed to provide an early budget indication of what a student resource allocation budget would look like for each of those schools and was clear that there was an exceptions process, that this was going to have to be an ongoing conversation and that these are not final budgets.

I cannot be any clearer: these are not final budgets. They were never intended to be final budgets, and we will continue to work. I recognise that communication could have been clearer along the way.

MS LEE: Minister, were you aware that schools would have to cut support staff, increase class sizes, cut programs and have more split and collapsed classes as a result of these budget cuts?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I reject Ms Lee's characterisation of all of this. As I said in response to the last question, school budgets have not been finalised for 2027. I recognise that this has been a challenging process and that some schools have been surprised by what actually came out in their SRA budget. The vast majority of principals would have known that changes were coming, because they have been engaged in this budget conversation for some time and last year they would have seen the public school system resourcing review and the recommendations of that review, and these conversations about the principles on which the Education Directorate were going to establish budgets for the 2027 school year has been happening. But some schools are in a challenging situation.

Part of the reason that this needs to be an iterative conversation is that the Education Directorate does not have fully visibility of all of the decisions that have been made at a school level and of all the challenges that individual schools are facing. That is why school principals were given an indicative early student resource allocation-based budget and asked to come back, and there is an exceptions process with \$8 million on the table. It is why the directorate has listened to the feedback that we have received—this is the first time that we have done the budget process in this way—and is slowing down that process and continuing that engagement on a school-by-school basis. I reiterate: these are not final budgets for 2027 and that none of the things that Ms Lee has indicated is based on evidence.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, what assessment did you undertake on the impact on staffing, class sizes and core school services of these significant cuts to school budgets?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I reiterate that these are not final school budgets and that there an exceptions process, which was made clear from day one that has additional funding in it. I had detailed conversations with the Education Directorate about what the SRA indicated budgets would look like for schools and what the process was going to be to manage with each individual who was going to be in a challenging situation to work through that exceptions process.

I recognise, as I said in my response to the first question, that, clearly, all of this has not been communicated either to principals or to the union as clearly as it should have been. I am happy to take some responsibility for that, but I also acknowledge that there is a small team in the Education Directorate who have been working very hard on the basis of the information that was available to them, recognising that part of the problem here is that they do not have transparency of all of that information because of the level of autonomy that our schools have had and the level of autonomy that principals have had to make those decisions over time.

That is why it needs to be an iterative conversation with principals. I again thank all of the principals and the school leaders who are engaging productively in this conversation. I thank the union for its advocacy for its members. It is the union's job to advocate for its members. I have showed up every time I have been invited. I went to a meeting with teachers, school leaders and LSAs to talk about how they are experiencing this process. As a result of my conversations and the directorate's conversations, this process is changing. This process is being slowed down so that we can get under the hood and understand all of these issues.

Public schools—funding

MS LEE: My questions to the Minister for Education. Minister, media reporting this morning details the ACT schools which will receive cuts to their 2027 budgets, including the schools that support some of our most vulnerable students such as Malkara School, with a cut of over \$2.8 million; the Woden School, with a cut of over \$1.6 million; Black Mountain School, with a cut of over \$3 million; and Cranleigh School, with a cut of over \$1.7 million.

Minister, before these cuts were imposed, what consultation did you undertake with the principals, staff and parent communities of Malkara, Woden, Black Mountain and Cranleigh Schools?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I really encourage Ms Lee to actually read the entire article, because it is very clear in the article that she is quoting from that there will be no cuts to specialist schools. The conversation, from the get-go, with specialist school principals was, "There's an additional \$7 million that has been allocated to ensure that no specialist school will have its funding reduced from 2026-2027." It says that in the article, Mr Speaker! It has been a conversation with every school principal at specialist schools. This scaremongering from those opposite, when it has been clarified, in writing, in the same article that she is talking about—

Mr Cocks: A point of order. I seek your wisdom, Mr Speaker, as to whether the word "scaremongering" is, in fact, parliamentary, given it implies that the facts we are presenting are not correct, and as to whether the minister is embarking on personal reflections as well.

MR SPEAKER: Sure; I was actually considering this yesterday on the word "fearmongering", because that was being thrown around a bit. I had a look, under standing order 54, at whether that was an unparliamentary word, and I could not find a precedent that it was. I then looked at standing order 55 and whether it is a reflection,

and I think it is somewhat debatable. But the precedent at this place is that words like “fearmongering” and “scaremongering” are used. They are used in debate, and the precedent has not been to rule them out of order, so I will not be changing that precedent. There is no point of order.

MS LEE: Minister, did you personally sign off on these cuts to Malkara, Woden, Black Mountain and Cranleigh schools? And if not, why not? Who did?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, what I signed off on was the proposed approach that would see no reduction in funding for our specialist schools, as indicated in the article. As I have said in response to my first question, it was one of the key bits of conversation that I had with the directorate: “We need to ensure our communication with specialist schools is clear that, while this is what the SRA budget—the student resource allocation budget—would indicate would be the funding for those specialist schools, that is not an appropriate funding model to apply to the specialist schools and they would be treated separately, outside of that model.”

So, modelling was done—“What if you applied this model to those specialist schools?” That modelling was done, and those numbers are available, but that is not what is happening, and it has been clear. My understanding is that the Education Directorate made that clear to specialist school leaders. From the get-go we have made it clear. My understanding is that it was made clear to the union. And I am now making it clear, yet again, in this place that specialist schools are not going to be funded on the basis of that formula. An additional \$7 million has been allocated to ensure that is the case, and specialist schools will not receive less funding in 2027 than they are in 2026.

MR COCKS: Minister, what do you say to the parents of vulnerable students at these schools who are now being faced with the distress of potential cuts to school resources and support services?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I would say: do not listen to the Canberra Liberals—

Mr Parton: Or the union!

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Read the actual article and the information that is in the article. Mr Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is verballing in the union. The union is not claiming that these cuts are going to be applied to specialist schools. They are not claiming that these cuts are going to be applied to specialist schools. They know that is not true. The opposition is—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Cocks: A point of order. By reflecting on anything from the opposition, the minister is now debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Cox, the Leader of the Opposition was interjecting and making comments, so he was inviting it. The minister was also asked, “What would you say?” She is telling us what she would say, so in that sense it is in order, but I would remind the minister not to debate the question, if she is leaning towards that approach.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: What I would say is this: do not listen to the opposition; read the line in the article that says:

That's why there's an additional \$7 million in the 2027 school year across specialist schools above their SRA—so no specialist school will have less funding than in 2026.

Public schools—funding

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, media reports this morning include evidence from a staff member at an ACT primary school who says that parents were not informed about cuts to learning support assistants, and that schools were simply handed reduced budgets and told to make cuts. The staff member said, "Nobody is actually considering the level of support that the kids need" and described the process as "absolutely disgusting" and being "kept such a secret".

Minister, according to figures, Malkara, Woden, Black Mountain and Cranleigh schools have cumulatively received a cut of almost \$10 million, and you say that there is an additional \$7 million to support them. How will these schools cover the shortfall of almost \$3 million, despite your adamant assertion that they will not receive a cut?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I can absolutely assure the Assembly, as I have already done multiple times, that no specialist school will receive less funding in 2027 than in 2026.

Ms Lee: So, are they getting the 10 or not? You just said seven. You said it again today. Yep, magic pudding.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, the interjections by those opposite are quite disorderly. I recognise that this commentary—

MR SPEAKER: Just, on a point of order, the Minister is right. So, if you could just tone it down or cease altogether would be great.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I recognise that this commentary is distressing for parents. I do understand that. I do not think that the way that some members of this place are managing that is helping to support those parents who do feel a level of distress. I would very much say to parents that school budgets for 2027 have not been finalised. There are some difficult conversations happening with principals about what those budgets will look like. We have heard the feedback about this process. We have slowed down this process to ensure those detailed conversations can take place. But overall, we are allocating additional funding across our public education system.

Ms Lee: Point of order, Mr Speaker. My question to the minister was very specific. She specifically stated a number of times now that those specialist schools will not receive cuts, but she has also quoted the figures. And I have specifically and directly asked her: with the cuts of almost \$10 million, and with \$7 million to be injected, how is the shortfall of \$3 million going to made up? She has not answered that question.

MR SPEAKER: On the point of order, do you anything to add? No. Look, I accept that you have asked the question about the 10 versus 7, but she has also guaranteed that

there will be no cuts, so I think she has been responsive and relevant.

Ms Lee: Oh, so it is another three, is it?

MR SPEAKER: It is more of a debating point, I think, Ms Lee, than a point of order.

MS LEE: Supplementary question? Minister, when will the school budgets be finalised? Given that you keep stating that they have not been, when will they be finalised? And do you personally accept responsibility for the incredible distress and confusion this budget process has had on principals and teachers and the school communities?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think that was two questions, but I will answer both of them. School budgets will be finalised in April 2027, in line with what happens every single year. School budgets are never finalised until enrolments are known for that school year.

Ms Lee: So, they are meant to just go and have to start the school year?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: That is what happens every single year. But there is always an indicative budget that is provided, that is pretty close. But school budgets are never finalised until enrolments are known; never, in any year.

Ms Lee: So, pretty close? Okay, so this is what it is going to look like?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: In terms of the distress, I am happy to apologise to any teacher, learning support assistant, parent, carer, student or principal who has experienced distress as part of this process—but I do think that distress is exacerbated by the way that the opposition is managing this. They are not seeking to reduce that distress, they seeking to escalate it for political reasons.

Ms Lee: No, we are advocating on their behalf. Who do you think come to us?

MR CAIN: Supplementary. Minister, will you guarantee that no student with high needs will lose vital support as a result of these budget adjustments?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: In terms of the support for students with disability, we are putting in an additional \$7 million there as well—and I will correct the record if that number is not accurate—and that includes those at specialist schools. But we are also changing the model of funding in line with the national changes to an adjustment phased resourcing model. So, funding will be allocated on the basis of student need rather than a diagnosis-and-deficit model.

Ms Lee: So, the need is \$3 million stripped?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: What we have seen in terms of funding for schools in relation to students with disability is that parents have been desperately trying to get a diagnosis for their child so that they can access additional support in their schools. That is not an appropriate model, for children to require a diagnosis when it is clear that additional support is required. That is why the adjustment phased resourcing model has been

introduced. And schools have undertaken the nationally consistent data collection, and that was part of the reason that drove the timing of the conversation with schools about their budgets; because that NCCD data collection process needed to be completed before the Education Directorate could allocate funding under the adjustment-based resourcing model. So, Mr Cain's question really goes to that fundamental shift in how we think about supporting schools to support students who need additional support.

MR SPEAKER: Point of order, Mr Cocks?

Mr Cocks: Under 118AA, Mr Cain's question was not actually about the policy behind the model which was chosen. It was indeed about the implementation impact on the individual students. He has asked whether the minister could guarantee that no student with high needs will lose support. I do not believe that the minister has directly responded to that question, and I would ask her to come back.

MR SPEAKER: Yes, I think, you have asked for a guarantee and she is not required to provide a yes/no answer. I think she was relevant and responsive. I accept that she has not given a categorical "yes" or "no" answer, but that does not mean she was neither responsive nor relevant.

Public schools—funding

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, media reporting today shows that at least 58 ACT schools will receive less funding in 2027 than they received in 2026. Analysis of the figures published by the *Canberra Times* indicates these schools will lose more than \$43 million, while the schools receiving increases will get just over \$3.8 million, leaving a net reduction of almost \$40 million across the system. In addition to that, Angela Burroughs, the head of the ACT branch of the Australian Education Union, has actually quoted a figure of \$50 million. Minister, if these are not cuts, can you please explain why 58 schools will have less money available to them in 2027 than they had in 2026?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think I have already explained multiple times, Mr Speaker, that school budgets for 2027 have not been finalised at this point.

MS LEE: Minister, isn't the reality that schools are being asked to do more with less and that it is students, teachers and parents who ultimately pay the price of your school funding cuts?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No, Mr Speaker.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, given your repeated refusal to admit that these are cuts, why should staff, school leaders and parents have any confidence that you understand what is happening in the schools you are responsible for?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Well, we were clear from the get-go when we started talking about school budgets that some schools would see a reduction in their funding from 2026 to 2027, that for some schools this would be a challenge to manage, and that the Education Directorate would work with those principals and schools to manage through this process. We have been very clear about that. I have been clear from the start that

this would be challenging, as the directorate has for some schools. I had an opinion piece in *Region Canberra* quite recently that absolutely acknowledged that this would be a challenging process for some schools. But what I also said was that no principal, no school leader and no school would be on their own in managing this process and that the Education Directorate would be there to walk with them, to support them and to understand the issues and make sure that they could manage their schools safely and efficiently to deliver an excellent education and a great place to work for teachers and other staff.

Public schools—funding

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Education.

Minister, as a result of the funding cuts for individual schools in 2027, schools have had to let go of a significant number of LSAs. Mount Rogers Primary is having to let go of 27 of their 30 LSAs, according to the *Canberra Times* article this morning. In the wake of these school budget cuts, what are you doing to ensure schools have enough funding to support students with complex needs, noting the tangible improvements from the new adjustments-based resourcing model will not reach students in time for next year's, and that the LSAs will have lost their jobs by then?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, I am not sure why Miss Nuttall claims that the adjustment-based resourcing model will not have a tangible impact next year. That is part of what we have been implementing through this budget process. In relation to the impact of school budgets, I have sought some further information in relation to the claims made in the *Canberra Times* in relation to the learning support assistant numbers at particular schools.

As I have indicated, school budgets for 2027 have not been finalised. There is still a significant amount of work for some of those schools where the SRA model would indicate a significant reduction in their budgets to work through the exceptions process with the Education Directorate to ensure that they can staff their schools appropriately and deliver safe and effective education for all students, no matter what their disability or complexity might be.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, did the Education Directorate account for the loss of LSAs from next year's school classrooms when it decided to reduce individual school budgets for next year? Or did they think it was okay to let them know in April about their job in January?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am not quite sure where the latter part of that question comes from, Mr Speaker. It is standard process, as I have said earlier, that final budgets are received in April once enrolments are known, but also that indicative budgets are provided and that principals are able to staff their schools, obviously, for the beginning of the school year. And I would just repeat again, Mr Speaker—because it seems to be not sinking in—that school budgets for 2027 have not been finalised. This is an iterative process and there is an exceptions process to support schools that need that support from the directorate. And once again, I thank principals and school leaders and everybody who has made contact with me to express their concern, and we are trying to clarify this process with all of those people who are contacting us.

MS CLAY: Minister, what data were schools asked to provide to the Education Directorate to determine their indicative school budget for next year?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Well, as I indicated, the NCCD, the data collection around the needs of students with additional learning support needs was one of those pieces of data that was provided by schools. That was part of the reason that the timing was the way it was. Obviously, there is enrolment data from school to school. There is a range of other data that the Education Directorate pulled together to provide these early indicative budgets based on the school student resourcing allocation model.

I will take on notice the detail of that to provide further information about the data. But as I have indicated before, part of the reason that the Education Directorate was going to principals to say, “This is what we know. And on the basis of what we know, this is the indicative SRA-based budget. But we need to hear back from you because we know that there are things we do not know.” We knew that there were things that the Education Directorate did not know because of the nature of our 93 pretty autonomous schools, which is part of the reason that we are undertaking the One Public Education reform process.

Australian-European Union Free trade agreement—ACT impact

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Trade, Investment and the Knowledge Economy. Chief Minister, one of the key opportunities often associated with trade agreements is attracting new investment. How can the Australia-European Union Free Trade Agreement help attract investment to the ACT and support local economic growth?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for that great question. As I am sure members are aware, Europe is of course home to many of the world’s leading companies, investors, research organisations and technology firms. As barriers to trade and investment are reduced and economic relationships deepen through this trade agreement, Canberra is well positioned to attract significantly greater interest from European businesses looking to establish partnerships, invest in innovation and expand their presence in Australia. We offer a unique value proposition in this context. We have Australia’s most highly skilled workforce, world-class universities, strong research capability, a sophisticated technology sector, a stable economy and a very well-educated community. These are exactly the attributes that international investors are increasingly seeking when making decisions about where to invest. We are particularly well placed to attract investments in areas like cybersecurity, defence technologies, digital services, clean energy, health innovation, space technologies, and advanced manufacturing.

Importantly, though, investment is not just about capital; it is also about expertise, technology, transferred global networks, and access to new markets. When an international company invests in Canberra, local businesses gain new opportunities, researchers gain new partners and workers gain access to new high-quality jobs. The government seeks to position Canberra as one of the most innovative and globally connected cities in our region, and stronger economic ties with Europe will help us to attract investment that will be needed to grow our economy and create jobs in the future.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Chief Minister, what steps is the ACT government taking to ensure Canberra is ready to capture these investment opportunities as the agreement comes into effect?

MR BARR: We are actively building Canberra's reputation as a destination for investment, innovation and business growth. Through Invest Canberra, our innovation ecosystem and our partnerships with universities and industries, we are promoting Canberra internationally as a city where business can access talent, research, expertise and government decision-makers in one location. We are also investing in the foundations of future growth, including digital capability, innovation, precinct skills development, and support for emerging industries. These investments strengthen Canberra's attractiveness to international investors who are seeking longer term opportunities.

As I mentioned yesterday and in the first answer, Europe's strengths align closely with Canberra's. We see particular opportunities in clean tech, cybersecurity, space, defence, health and innovation, and across the plethora of advanced professional services. These are sectors where Canberra is already developing a strong international reputation. So, as this trade agreement is implemented, if the Australian parliament has the wisdom to vote for it, the government will work in market with businesses, universities and industry leaders to promote Canberra as a destination for EU investment and collaboration. Our objective is straightforward: to ensure that, when European firms look to Australia for their next investment, Canberra is not seen simply as the nation's capital but also as one of Australia's leading centres of innovation, talent and opportunity.

Land—prices

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Chief Minister. The SLA is currently offering 400 square metre blocks at Whitlam for more than \$600,000. In contrast, buyers could have a 900 square metre block at Googong for \$500,000. Does the government accept that the price of land and housing is a key reason many young Canberrans and their families are leaving the ACT?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Castley for the question. Certainly the price of land varies depending on its geographic location. Whitlam is considerably closer to employment and services in the ACT than Googong is. So it is not unaccepted that there would be differences in land values. We will see across the ACT land values will vary depending on the location of the land. The most valuable and expensive land in Canberra tends to be located in the inner south of the city. That is, again, not surprising given its proximity to employment and to services.

It is clear that we operate within a constrained land availability environment and that there always has been and always will be land releases in regional New South Wales. Those that are proximate to the ACT will seek to leverage off the employment and services that are available in the territory.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, does the government know which groups of Canberrans are driving domestic migration, the reasons they are going or the fiscal

impacts of their departures?

MR BARR: We have considerable movement across the ACT border every year for a variety of reasons. That includes movement of students and the movement of defence families and those involved in politics and diplomacy. There will often be movement around Australia and between Canberra and international destinations based on employment. I would say that the strongest factor that drives movement is employment. There are also elements on the lifecycle too. We attract a very significant amount of people in their late teens and early 20s and we will often see a movement of people in their retirement phase of life out of the ACT as their working life concludes. Those trends have been reasonably consistent over the duration of this city's history.

MS CARRICK: Chief Minister, will you do analysis to determine what cohort of people moving across the border and to the surrounding region?

MR BARR: We do have data from the ABS. I have not seen this year's, but in most years there is a net inflow into the ACT from surrounding New South Wales rather going the other way. There has been a topical conversation or perhaps an urban myth over many years that somehow there are thousands of people who leave the ACT just to go across the border each year. The population data does not support that. Of course, there is movement—there always will be—but the ACT's population has been growing faster than the surrounding region.

Ms Carrick: Mr Speaker, on a point of order: I asked the Chief Minister if he will do analysis to determine the cohorts that are moving across the border.

MR BARR: That analysis is undertaken by the ABS. We just had a census and we will get data from that next year. So I will not replicate the ABS work. We will wait for that data. The point I was making to Ms Carrick is that it is an urban myth—perpetuated by some with an interesting agenda of wanting to talk Canberra down. But the evidence has been that the ACT has been growing faster than the region surrounding us—and that has been the case for more than a decade.

Land—Affordable Home Purchase Scheme

MS CARRICK: Chief Minister, participants in the Affordable Home Purchase Scheme in Whitlam have endured years of delay. Now, as these homes approach completion, buyers report being pressured to sign certificates of occupancy before they have had sufficient opportunity to obtain independent legal or building advice about changes to the plans and incomplete works. At the same time, buyers remain uncertain about whether landscaping and paths will be delivered without additional costs to purchasers.

Chief Minister, why were Affordable Home Purchase Scheme buyers in Whitlam subject to repeated pressure from builders in the SLA to sign certificates of occupancy before they had adequate opportunity to undertake independent due diligence as required on the form?

MR BARR: I am not certain that that is a fair assessment of the situation as it relates, certainly, to the SLA. I cannot comment definitively on what builders might have sought to do outside of any influence of government or the SLA, but I will seek further

information from the SLA in relation to the accusation in that question that they have not behaved appropriately. I would be surprised if that were the case, but I cannot be certain, obviously, what individual builders may or may not do.

MS CARRICK: Chief Minister, what steps did the SLA take to ensure buyers had access to all relevant information, including inspection and compliance reports, before being asked to sign the certificate of occupancy?

MR BARR: I will take that on notice.

MR EMERSON: Chief Minister, can you guarantee that all homes under the scheme will be handed over complete, including landscaping, fencing and paths, and that buyers will not be required to bear any additional costs for works that were in their contracts?

MR BARR: I am not sure I can give a guarantee in this place right now. I will need to seek some further advice on that matter. But I think the final part of Mr Emerson's question related to contracts, and I would expect contracts to be honoured.

Mr Emerson: Just to clarify. He said he would need to seek further advice. Was that taken on notice?

MR SPEAKER: I think he said he will take further advice. You asked for a guarantee, and he said he cannot provide that guarantee. He has been relevant. He has answered the question, but I think he is going to provide further information if he can. Is that right?

MR BARR: Yes. I said I would seek further information from the SLA in relation to that matter, but where it relates to honouring contracts, I would expect that they would be honoured.

MyWay+—real-time passenger information

MR BRADDOCK: My question is for the Minister for Transport. Minister, a Transport Canberra service update dated 15 September lists an issue which prevents real-time passenger information being shown in the Android version of the MyWay+ app. This means Android phone users may lack critical information in planning their public transport trip. Minister, what is the issue? When will the functionality of real-time passenger information be restored?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Braddock for the question. I have been briefed that there have been two issues. One is being resolved as we speak, and another requires further investigation. The latter is about real-time passenger information which is affecting some Android users but not all. I, certainly, was being affected but I am not now. But I do not have the full brief on that yet.

I do have some answers about the other issue, which is surrounding the MyWay+ Android application and its interaction with Google Play. The advice I have got is that there was an issue with compliance with Google's target API requirements for Android applications. As I understand it, Google requires existing apps to meet specified target API levels, to remain available to users on the newer Android operating systems. This

is a yearly requirement. Google describes this as its regular annual update process.

There was an announcement to developers about this year's timeframe on 15 July. The relevant enforcement date was 31 August, and developers were able to request an extension to 1 November if more time was required. I have been advised that SkedGo, which develops and maintains the application under NEC's arrangements, identified the requirement in mid-August and commenced work on an updated application.

It advised the territory on 31 August that an updated was required but, as I understand it, did not give advance warning that there would be an impact on the application's availability from that date. The updated Android application has now subsequently been submitted through Google Play, and it is being updated progressively through a staged rollout.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister how is the government managing the contract with NEC to ensure they actually deliver on their contractual obligations?

MS CHEYNE: Regarding the application—and I will get directly to Mr Braddock's question—what we know is the application did not meet the relevant requirement when Google's 31 August enforcement arrangements took effect. What I am still establishing is whether the available extension to 1 November was sought or obtained, and the precise chronology of the advice we received by NEC and its subcontractor, and how that was communicated.

I do expect a major technology contractor to anticipate routine platform requirements; to tell the territory early when there is a risk to customers; and to provide clear and technically accurate explanations when something goes wrong.

I have been the transport minister for a relatively short period, and while I am a new transport minister, I am not a patient one. I am seeking a meeting with the new CEO of NEC. There are live, ongoing contractual negotiations underway and I do wish to wish to prejudice them, but I will certainly keep the Assembly updated to the extent that I can. But I would say that I have already had to spend, in the last two months, a considerable amount of time seeking clarity on MyWay+ matters, and my tolerance for avoidable surprises and unclear explanations is extremely limited.

MS CLAY: Minister, two years after launch, when is will Canberra get the worldclass transport system we were promised?

MS CHEYNE: That is a tricky question for me to answer, Mr Speaker, and I am not seeking to be facetious here. NEC remains the territory's principal contractor for MyWay+ but there are contractual and commercial matters being worked through between the parties, and negotiating those matters publicly or saying anything that might prejudice the territory's position is not something that I am in a position to do.

I think that does go to the heart of what Ms Clay is asking—because that is fulfilling the contractual arrangements of what we have asked. While I cannot pre-judge the territory's contractual position, it certainly does not prevent me from demanding an explanation and expecting better performance. I think NEC should be aware that I will be forensic in my understanding of the issues, and how they are engaging with the

territory—as Transport Canberra is already aware that I am forensic in how it is managing its contract with NEC. I look forward to having a very frank and robust conversation with the CEO of NEC soon.

ACT Public Service—employment of staff subject to family or domestic violence investigations

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for the Public Service. Minister, what is the government’s policy in relation to the ongoing employment of staff subject to family or domestic violence orders, charges or investigations?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: This is one of those matters in relation to the public service that would be the responsibility of the Head of Service and Directors-General, but I will take the question on notice.

MR EMERSON: I am happy if this is better directed to the Chief Minister for response. Minister/Chief Minister are any ACTPS senior executives currently on leave while subject to family or domestic violence orders, charges or investigations?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice.

MS CARRICK: Minister, how many senior executive positions across the ACTPS, including Directors-General and Deputy Directors-General, are currently being filled by someone in an acting capacity while the person who holds a substantive role is on extended leave?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice.

Firearms—legislation

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Minister, last week I asked what evidence the government had that limiting the number of firearms a licensed owner can possess would make Canberra safer. You told the Assembly that:

Part of the National Firearms Agreement ... is to establish caps on firearms.

Minister, I have reviewed the National Firearms Agreement and cannot find a provision establishing a general cap or limit on firearms ownership. Can you identify the provision of the agreement you were referring to?

DR PATERSON: I believe the new agreement that has been—I am not sure if the new agreement that has been negotiated is public yet, but the previous agreement did not have caps. So the states and territories are negotiating with the commonwealth around a new national firearms agreement and as part of that is a discussion around caps.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, given the WA Law Reform Commission recommended there should be no upper limits, did you consider that when introducing the change in this legislation?

DR PATERSON: We considered that. We considered all the evidence from the inquiries in WA and also considered what New South Wales passed in their parliament towards the end of last year. We took all that into consideration, as well as discussions with the commonwealth and with other states and territories, which have been progressing over the best part of nearly a year now, and that is where we arrived at the legislation that I introduced into the Assembly, which has been under committee inquiry and I do not believe the committee inquiry recommended that there was no caps, but we will continue to work through the bill, and I will bring that back to the Assembly at some point in time.

MR PARTON: Minister, can you reveal to the Assembly the exact source which has led you to go with the cap currently in the bill, as per the answer to your question in question time last week.

DR PATERSON: As I said, we took evidence from a variety of sources to arrive at the decision to progress and introduce legislation with the cap of five firearms with exemptions for up to 10 and a range of other exemptions that are available as well. So we have introduced that legislation. I will still continue to work through—

Mr Parton: Point of order on relevance, the question was to very specifically reveal to the Assembly the source that led to the cap that is in the current bill and I am not sure that the minister is revealing that.

DR PATERSON: So we do not take a single source of information or single point of information. We assess the broad range of evidence available to us, a range of stakeholders and their advocacy, and then we compile all that—

MR SPEAKER: I will just rule on the point of order. You have asked if there is an exact source. She said there is a variety of sources, so she is responding to the question, Mr Parton. Minister, continue.

DR PATERSON: I have nothing further to add.

Budget—Treasurer's advances

MS CLAY: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, the June quarterly financial report was tabled in mid-August, after estimates hearings had concluded, meaning the Assembly had no opportunity to scrutinise it before the budget cycle closed. It discloses three big cost blowouts: a \$3.2 million capital injection for defect rectification at the new Canberra Hospital pharmacy, a \$700,000 Treasurer's advance to cover shortfalls in Canberra Theatre ticket sales, and an \$18.3 million Treasurer's advance for additional child protection costs. When did the government first become aware of the defects with the pharmacy, requiring a \$3.2 million capital injection, and why didn't the government identify this during construction handover or the defects liability inspection so the territory would not have to pay for it?

MR STEEL: I will take that question on notice.

MS CLAY: Why did theatre ticket sales fall so short that they needed a \$700,000

Treasurer's advance, and will the territory be liable for underwriting ticket sales for the new lyric theatre too?

MR STEEL: I will take that question on notice and come back to the Assembly with some more information.

MS VASSAROTTI: Why does the government continue to under-budget for child protection given the frequent budget blowouts, and what specific changes have you made to avoid this in future?

MR PETTERSSON: The ACT government responds to demand for child protection services as they emerge. The ACT government is committed to addressing the cost pressures that we are experiencing in care and protection. The provision of care for children is expensive. Commonly, children in care have complex trauma and require specialist services. This is expensive, but I believe there is commitment across the community to ensure that every child who enters care gets the services they need. We have seen a broad decline in the number of children in care in ACT. Simultaneously, we have also seen an increase in costs. This is a key priority of mine, as minister, to address.

Planning—Braddon Bowls Club site

MS VASSAROTTI: My question is to the Minister for Planning. My question is about the Braddon Bowls Club site. The environment and planning committee has recommended that you withdraw DPA-07—a proposal to amend the Territory Plan for the Braddon Bowls Club site. The committee was not convinced to support the DPA for a variety of reasons. It is quite clear that the proposal lacks an understanding of its neighbours and that more work needed to be done. The community who opposed this development would benefit from knowing what the next steps are. Can you advise whether you will approve, withdraw or return DPA-07 to the Territory Planning Authority? If not yet decided, what will you be taking into account in this decision?

MR STEEL: I have not yet made a decision on that and I have not yet received a briefing in relation to that. I understand the information that has been provided by the committee, and that will be considered, of course, in future decision-making. I look forward to updating the Assembly and the community about that.

MR SPEAKER: Ms Vassarotti, a supplementary?

Ms Vassarotti: I do have a have a supplementary, but is that question being taken on notice?

MR STEEL: No.

Ms Vassarotti: So you are not taking that question on notice?

MR STEEL: No; I answered that question.

MR SPEAKER: Is there a point of order, Ms Vassarotti or—

Ms Vassarotti: I asked the minister what he would be taking into account when making a decision.

MR SPEAKER: I think the minister said that he has not received a brief yet and so is unable to answer that element of it. That is my understanding. So I think we can probably move to a supplementary.

MS VASSAROTTI: Sure. Can you elaborate on what issues the Territory Planning Authority took into account before accepting the application by the proponent and releasing DPA-07 for public comment?

MR STEEL: I am happy to ask the independent Territory Planning Authority for some further information and come back to the Assembly. But there was, of course, the supporting report for DPA-07 which was published subject to consultation with the community. It has obviously been subject to some discussion in the community as well.

MR BRADDOCK: Why isn't advice from the agencies referred to in section 62 of the Planning Act 2023 made available in the draft planning documentation released for public comment?

MR STEEL: I am happy to come back with some further information about that. But the information that has been provided is available on the Planning website under DPA-07.

Access Canberra—customer accounts

MR CAIN: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, does Access Canberra currently hold money belonging to customers as positive balances in its clients' accounts, and if so, what is the total amount of customer money currently being held?

MS CHEYNE: Without more specificity, I do not think that I can answer the question on this floor, so I will take it on notice.

MR CAIN: Minister, are 100 per cent of those customer balances backed by funds immediately available to be returned to customers and does the territory earn any interest or other financial benefit from holding that money?

MS CHEYNE: I will take it on notice.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, why does Access Canberra not automatically refund positive client account balances to customers or automatically apply those funds to their next transactions?

MS CHEYNE: I note that the previous question was whether we do and now I am being asked why we do not. Accordingly, I will take it on notice.

Mr Barr: That is all the questions, Mr Speaker. The balance can be placed on the notice paper!

Supplementary answers to questions without notice

Firearms—legislation

DR PATERSON: I want to clarify my response to Mr Milligan’s question. The Chief Minister signed the National Firearms Agreement on 26 August this year. Caps were not a part of that agreement, but they are a part of the negotiations, currently, for the national gun buyback.

Planning—Braddon Bowls Club site—standing order 118AA

MR COCKS: Ms Vassarotti raised a point of order regarding a response from the minister. I am not sure whether she was doing so under 118AA or under relevance to the question. I am somewhat concerned, and I raise this under 118AA: the minister has chosen to respond simply that he is unable to answer a question.

The minister had an option—as Minister Cheyne has just done—to say: “I am unable to answer that question on the basis of information. I have not had a briefing. I will come back on notice.” However, Minister Steel has chosen to just say, “I do not know, I have not had a briefing,” and not respond to the question. I believe that under 118AA, the minister has not answered the question.

MR STEEL: I do not think that is actually a correct characterisation of what I said at all, but I clearly said that I needed to have a briefing from the directorate in relation to the matter. This is a statutory planning process, so I cannot necessarily come back and make a decision before the answer to the question on notice would be due.

I could not commit to providing it on notice. I would not be able to provide any further information, so I am just saying I would need to receive that before then making a decision. I think you have already actually deliberated on the question and provided advice to the Assembly in your earlier comments, Mr Speaker, so I would ask that you stick with that position.

MR SPEAKER: Yes, I will. I also note, Mr Cocks, that in the supplementaries the minister has said that he will take various aspects upon notice as well. I think that asking someone to make a decision on a statutory process or to provide information before that has come to a certain point in decision-making is problematic. He has responded to it to say that is why he is not going to answer. I get your point, but I do not think it is a point of order.

Language—unparliamentary

MR SPEAKER: Mr Cocks, you raised the issue of the word “scaremongering”, and I referenced “fearmongering” that had been used, similarly. There has been a ruling, and it was done by Speaker Burch in 2023: the Speaker considered the word borderline but in order. That was based on the context of it, and members were encouraged not to go into the realm of borderline. That is pretty much where I came to with “fearmongering” as well.

Just to elaborate on the point of order, I will allow “fearmongering” and “scaremongering”, but if they are overused and not used in an appropriate way, then we

might change that. You cannot use them simply as a response; it has to be relevant to the debate. In this case, it was, but as Speaker Burch said, these matters are borderline, and members are to be aware of that in their usage.

MS CHEYNE: While we are traversing the history of unparliamentary language, “magic pudding” was used repeatedly during this question time, and I would seek your advice before question time tomorrow.

MR COCKS: On the point of order, Mr Speaker, I would point out that “the magic pudding” seems to have been the favourite phrase of the government in some previous debates, and should it to be ruled to be unparliamentary, then perhaps the government may wish to consider their approach to some debates as well.

MR SPEAKER: I am not ruling the words “magic pudding” out of order, because it would very much depend on the context. To be frank, I cannot recall the context, so I am not ruling it out of order, Ms Cheyne—in terms of the words “magic pudding”.

Members, it is a balance between lively debate and unparliamentary language. I do not want to constrain you so much that we cannot have a vigorous debate in here, but I would ask you all to be mindful of that borderline, as Speaker Burch wisely put it.

MS CHEYNE: It is all about standards.

MR SPEAKER: Well, “magic pudding” I have ruled on, Ms Cheyne; it is not categorically out of order. You would need to raise it at the time so that I have the context.

Mr Parton: I think she’s fearmongering, Mr Speaker!

Mr Barr: Now you are scaremongering on fearmongering about the magic pudding, Mr Parton!

MR SPEAKER: Mr Barr, it is not being helpful, is it?

Mr Barr: No, it is not. I apologise, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr Barr; how the wheel turns!

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (3.05): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) international education is one of the Territory’s largest export industries, worth around \$1.4 billion a year and accounting for more than half of the Territory’s services exports, with international students making up nearly half of Canberra’s 40,000 tertiary students and contributing significantly to the local economy, workforce and community life;
- (b) according to Study Australia, Canberra welcomes nearly 20,000 international students from over 100 countries each year, reflecting its reputation as Australia’s education capital;

- (c) international students help meet workforce needs while studying, build careers in Canberra after graduation and help make Canberra a more welcoming, inclusive and multicultural city;
 - (d) skilled migration addresses shortages across sectors including health, education, IT, construction and professional services, and the Territory's long-term prosperity depends on attracting and retaining such workers, researchers and innovators;
 - (e) the Australian Government recognises international education as a major national economic contributor, and migration and education policy settings can significantly affect the Territory's economy, workforce and research capability; and
 - (f) clear pathways from study to skilled employment serve both national migration objectives and the Territory's workforce needs;
- (2) recognises that:
- (a) the Territory's economy is built on a highly educated workforce, a strong higher education sector and knowledge-intensive industries, with universities among its largest employers and drivers of research excellence;
 - (b) Canberra offers international students and skilled migrants a genuine point of difference with recognised institutions, strong graduate outcomes, a safe community, valuable post-study work rights, affordability relative to other capitals and real career prospects;
 - (c) retaining international graduates strengthens workforce development, productivity and business growth, and gives employers access to globally connected talent;
 - (d) through Study Canberra, the Government has identified opportunities to deepen education, talent and economic links with Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and
 - (e) recent Australian Government migration reforms preserve exemptions for ASEAN students and higher degree research students, including PhD candidates, recognising a contribution vital to Canberra's research capability, innovation and future workforce; and
- (3) calls on the Government to:
- (a) continue to advocate to the Australian Government for migration and education settings that recognise the Territory's unique economic, demographic and research-intensive circumstances, including for higher degree research students;
 - (b) work with universities, employers and community organisations to attract and retain international students, skilled migrants and researchers, and connect them with employment and settlement services;
 - (c) identify opportunities to retain graduates in sectors facing workforce shortages and areas of strategic importance to the Territory economy;
 - (d) continue to promote Canberra internationally as Australia's education capital and expand Study Canberra's engagement with priority ASEAN markets;
 - (e) make the most of exemptions and priority pathways available to ASEAN students and higher degree research students; and

- (f) report to the Assembly by the last sitting day of June 2027 on progress supporting international students and skilled migration outcomes in the Territory.

I have brought this motion before the Assembly because I think it is important that, at a time when there is considerable public debate about international education and skilled migration, the Assembly is clear about where it stands on behalf of the Australian Capital Territory. I accept it is not the most controversial motion I will ever bring to the Assembly. I will not be accused of terror-mongering as I go through it. I landed in Canberra at 9.30 pm on Monday evening, and at that moment there was a live question of whether I would be able to give Mr Cocks adequate satisfaction if we had to duke something out. It turns out I am feeling pretty good, but I am not quite running on all cylinders. I could hold my end up. However, I particularly want to thank Ben, on my team, for developing this idea with me last week while I was 10 hours in the past, and my colleagues in the Assembly, particularly Mr Braddock, for thoughtful contributions.

While the primary policy levers on this issue are in the hands of the Australian government, this motion scrutinises those policies through an ACT lens. Along with advocacy from the executive and ACT stakeholders, including and hopefully led by students themselves, the discussion we leave on the record today about the ACT's principles and policy approach to international education and skilled migration will influence when, and how firmly, those levers are pulled.

This motion puts people at the centre. International students and skilled migrants are intelligent, ambitious and hard-working people who choose to build their futures in Canberra. They make the decision to leave behind family, friends and familiar surroundings to pursue opportunities here. Despite the challenges of settling into a new city and country, they contribute to our community from the moment they arrive, through their work, studies and participation in civic life. Many go on to become an important part of Canberra's story.

One of the things I respect most about Canberra is how consistently we punch above our weight. We are not Australia's largest city and we do not have the advantages that come from a large population or a vast industrial base. Harvesting the Brindabella's vast natural resources of low-value and block-faulted granites is not an option. Our success has always come from investing in people. Canberra's strength lies in its knowledge, skills, educational institutions and ability to attract talented people from around Australia and around the world. Time and again, our city has demonstrated that, when we invest in people and ideas, we can achieve extraordinary things, and that is why discussions about international education, skilled migration and talent attraction are so important to our future.

As my motion notes, international education is one of the territory's largest export industries. It is worth around \$1.4 billion each year and it accounts for more than half of our services exports. That is a significant economic contribution. But the figures alone do not tell the whole story. Behind that number are jobs, businesses and opportunities. International education supports employment across a range of sectors. It helps sustain local businesses, it supports demand for goods and services, it contributes to research activity, and it drives innovation within our universities and

educational institutions.

One of Canberra's greatest strengths is that we are already educating many of the people we need for the future. In 2023, Vice-Chancellor of the ANU, Professor Brian Schmidt, said, "International education delivers outcomes that benefit all of us." Canberra is Australia's education capital. We ought to be honoured that people from all over the world want to come and study in our great city. The challenge before us is ensuring that more of those graduates choose to remain here after completing their studies.

This motion calls on the government to identify opportunities to retain graduates in sectors experiencing workforce shortages and in industries critical to the territory's future. Retaining talented graduates strengthens our workforce, our research capability and our long-term prosperity. Decisions made by the commonwealth government on migration and education settings have significant consequences for the ACT. Unlike many other jurisdictions, Canberra's economy is deeply connected to higher education research and professional services. We are home to leading educational institutions and world-class research organisations. We have a highly educated workforce and an economy that relies heavily on knowledge-intensive industries. That means national policy decisions often have a particularly significant impact on our city. For that reason, I believe the ACT government should continue advocating, as strongly as it possibly can, for policy settings that recognise Canberra's unique circumstances. The realities of our economy, workforce and research sector should be reflected in national migration and education policy.

I also believe that there is another side to this conversation that deserves greater attention. We should ask what Canberra offers to those who choose to come here. Canberra is a globally connected city with a strong sense of community. We are home to leading educational institutions and world-class research organisations. We offer career opportunities across government, education, research, business and technology. We are safe. We are welcoming. We are strongly multicultural. We offer a quality of life that is recognised internationally.

Last week, the Oxford Economics Global Cities Index for 2026 ranked Canberra number one for quality of life for the second year in a row. These are advantages that should never be taken for granted. Cities around the world are competing to attract talented students, researchers and skilled workers. Success is increasingly dependent upon a city's ability to tell its story and demonstrate why people should choose to live, study and work there, and then make those promises a reality for the people who take those promises on trust. Canberra has a compelling story to tell and we should tell it with confidence. Government cannot achieve these outcomes on its own. Universities, employers, community organisations and industry all have a role to play. Many organisations across Canberra are already doing excellent work in this area, and this motion recognises the importance of continuing those partnerships.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on the importance of research and innovation. Canberra has a proud history of producing ideas and innovations that improve lives everywhere. Research conducted in Canberra has delivered breakthroughs with global impact. Innovations such as wi-fi technology, plastic banknotes and the Hendra virus vaccine demonstrate what can happen when talented researchers are given the opportunities to succeed. This is ultimately an optimistic motion about Canberra's future. International

students and skilled migrants are already making an enormous contribution to Canberra. Supporting them is an investment in education and an investment in Canberra's future prosperity.

The researchers, PhD students and innovators we attract today may well be responsible for the next breakthrough that improves lives, creates new industries or strengthens Australia's economy. This motion recognises that our city succeeds when we attract talented people, support them to succeed and create opportunities for them to stay. I note Mr Braddock's forthcoming amendments and indicate the government will be supporting them. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Trade, Investment and the Knowledge Economy, Minister for Tourism and Events, and Minister for Major Projects) (3.15): I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for bringing the motion before the Assembly. As he has highlighted, international education is probably our greatest economic success story. It contributes around \$1.4 billion annually to the territory economy, supports tens of thousands of jobs in Canberra and, importantly, reinforces our position as the nation's education capital.

Each year, close to 20,000 international students from over a hundred different countries choose to study in Canberra. They are attracted by the quality of our institutions, our exceptionally strong graduate outcomes, this city's safety, and our world-leading quality of life. This motion is about much more than education, though; it is also about economic growth, it is about workforce development and it is about Canberra's future competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge based global economy.

One thing is certain: our future prosperity is not going to be determined by natural resources or by geography; it will be determined by our ability to attract, develop and retain talented young people in our city. In a modern economy, talent drives productivity, innovation, investment and business formation, and that is why international education, skilled migration and economic development are increasingly interconnected. Let me make a clear statement: international students strengthen our universities, expand our city's research capability, contribute to our workforce and support local businesses. Many remain in Canberra after graduation, helping to address workforce shortages in health, education, information technology, engineering, construction and a wide range of professional services. Others become lifelong advocates for this city throughout the world, creating connections that support trade, investment and collaboration for decades to come.

I particularly welcome the motion's focus on ASEAN engagement. This region is home to more than 700 million people and some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Rising incomes, expanding middle classes and increasing demand for high-quality international education are creating significant opportunities for cities that can offer world-class education, research and career pathways. Canberra is exceptionally well-placed to meet that demand. The government's Study Canberra strategy has already identified South-East Asia as a priority market, and there is a strong foundation on which to build. Today, approximately 1,350 students from ASEAN member nations study in Canberra. That includes students from Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Cambodia. These students strengthen our universities, support our economy and, importantly, enrich our

community. Their contribution is substantial.

As I mentioned, international education contributes around \$1.4 billion annually to the territory economy. On average, each of the 20,000 international students is contributing approximately \$70,000 per year to the territory economy through tuition fees, accommodation, retail spending, hospitality spending, transport and other economic activity in our city. ASEAN students alone are contributing close to \$100 million each year to the territory economy, while simultaneously strengthening our workforce and our research capability.

The opportunity before us is not simply to maintain our position; it is to build on our strengths. So today I want to make clear that the government sees growing our ASEAN student market as a key component of the territory's future economic development. Accordingly, the government will work through Study Canberra to seek to achieve a 30 per cent increase in student numbers from ASEAN nations by the end of 2030. This would see the ASEAN student cohort grow from around 1,350 students today to approximately 1,750 students each year by the end of the decade. This is an ambitious but realistic target that reflects both the scale of opportunity in South-East Asia and our competitive advantages as a destination for study, research and career development.

To support the objective, the government will deepen partnerships with universities, schools, scholarship providers and government agencies across these priority markets, including Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. We will seek to strengthen Study Canberra's engagement in these markets and continue to promote Canberra as Australia's education capital and a city where students can build successful careers after graduation. The government will also place a stronger emphasis on attracting students in disciplines that align with the territory's long-term economic priorities. These include cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, engineering, data science, health and medical research, renewable energy, space technologies, advanced manufacturing, public policy, and professional services.

At the same time, we will continue strengthening the connection between education and employment. We will work with education institutions and employers to expand internship opportunities, work-integrated learning programs, and pathways into skilled employment. As one of Canberra's largest employers, the ACT government will also play a direct role in attracting and retaining skilled graduates and young professionals, with future Study Canberra activity placing an increased emphasis on career pathways within the ACT public service across policy, digital and technology, health, education, planning, infrastructure, emergency services and environmental management.

Our alumni also have a critical role to play in this. They are the most credible evidence we have that Canberra delivers on its promise. Their stories are of lived experience. They came to Canberra to learn and stayed because Canberra gave them compelling reasons to stay. That is more powerful than any institutional marketing campaign. We have already tasked our higher education institutions to place a focus on engaging their alumni as ambassadors, mentors and advocates, both domestically and internationally, to drive home the offering in our city. The objective is straightforward: more students choosing Canberra, more graduates building careers here, and more businesses benefiting from access to highly skilled talent.

The real value of international education extends well beyond a student's years of study. Some graduates remain in Canberra, helping to fill workforce shortages and driving innovation in our economy. Others will return home and become business leaders, entrepreneurs, researchers, investors and public servants throughout South-East Asia. In every case, we benefit from the relationships, the network and the goodwill that is created through their connection with our city. That is why Study Canberra is an economic development initiative. It supports workforce growth, it strengthens research capability, it deepens our engagement with the Indo-Pacific, and it helps attract investment, talent and partnerships that underpin Canberra's future prosperity.

As our nation's education capital, we begin this task from a position of considerable strength. We have outstanding universities, world-class public research institutions, Australia's most highly educated workforce, and a city that has a global reputation for liveability, safety and academic excellence, reinforced just last week through the world-leading Oxford Economics ranking. The task before us now is to build on these strengths and seize the opportunities that are emerging across our region. By growing our engagement with ASEAN nations, attracting more talented students, supporting them to succeed, and creating clear pathways into employment and research, we can strengthen our economy, expand our city's skills base and deepen our connections with one of the most dynamic regions in the world.

This is a practical agenda for growth. It is an agenda that supports jobs, it is an agenda that supports innovation, it is an agenda that supports investment into our economy, and it is an agenda that will help ensure we remain one of the most prosperous, globally connected and forward-looking cities in our region. For these reasons, I commend Mr Werner-Gibbings's motion to the Assembly.

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (3.24): I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for bringing forward this motion to the Assembly. As you all know, Canberra has a higher education sector that is the envy of other cities across Australia and also internationally. We are the home to world-class universities and research institutions that attract talented students from across the globe. More than 20,000 international students study in Canberra, and international education is the territory's largest export, generating around \$1.5 billion in exports in—

Mr Barr: You are rounding it up, James. Thank you.

MR MILLIGAN: Well, "\$1.54 billion" is what I have here. That was the export income in 2023-24. Each year, many domestic and international students graduate from our institutions with skills that Canberra desperately needs. Some will become researchers, entrepreneurs and highly skilled professionals. However, many will also choose to leave Canberra behind and take their recently acquired skills with them.

If attracting and retaining graduates is part of the government's response to workforce shortages, we should be asking how effectively our current programs are connecting graduates with areas of genuine skills and local employment. We should be asking how many students who want to build their lives in Canberra are successfully making that transition from education into employment. The government's focus on retention should extend beyond international students. A recent article in the *Canberra Times* states that the Chief Minister has spoken about measuring Canberra's success by how

many higher education students become lifelong residents. That is a worthwhile ambition.

In the next few weeks, thousands of Canberrans who are finishing year 12 will be considering whether their future lies here in Canberra—whether they study here or pursue employment and/or further education opportunities elsewhere. A successful government should be capable of giving young people who grew up here an opportunity and a reason to stay here. That being said, the opposition will be supporting the intent behind this motion to resolve the skills shortages and workplace shortages.

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (3.27): I rise to speak in support of Mr Werner-Gibblings's motion. There is much of its intent I agree with. Canberra should be a place where international students and skilled migrants can study, work, settle and build a future. We should absolutely be thinking about how we attract people, how we retain them and how we support them to be part of this community. But we are not talking about economic widgets here. In having this debate, we cannot solely focus on the economic benefits or the monetary flows. We must recognise these are individual people with hopes and dreams facing the significant challenges of studying in a strange country, perhaps in a different language. If we are to set up these students for success in Canberra and in their studies, we need to consider these very human factors.

That matters to this motion, because it asks how Canberra attracts and retains international students and skilled migrants, how people move from study into employment and how we help them settle here. It says that Canberra offers a genuine point of difference, strong institutions, career prospects, a safe community and a place to build a future. If we are serious about asking people to build a future here, we should ask what that future actually looks like. I also do not think we can have that conversation without also confronting the new commonwealth migration settings for international students. While this is a federal issue, it is hugely important to this motion. To quote a senior Shanghai-based researcher on international relations:

We are getting mixed messages about Australia's policy regarding international students. Do you want them or not? Should we advise Chinese students to consider going to other countries instead?

To explain the thread that connects these two issues, there is a clinical migration policy phrase, "secondary applicant". A secondary applicant can be someone's husband, their wife or their child. On a visa form they may be secondary; in a family they are not.

Last week the commonwealth announced that most future international students' graduate visa holders will no longer be able to bring family members with them. There are exceptions, including for students from Pacific and ASEAN countries and PhD students, and families already here will not be split up. Nationally, more than 45,000 visas were granted to family members of international students last year. These are not edge cases. Picture a student offered a place in Canberra. They have a partner and a young child. Their decision is no longer simply about this course or this city; it becomes a decision about whether one parent misses the school concert or whether ordinary dinners become video calls. I do not pretend to know what that would feel like. But that consequence deserves to be heard in this chamber.

I also want to engage fairly with the commonwealth's argument. Migration integrity matters. Visa hopping and deliberate abuse should be addressed. But Minister Burke also described the pathway from international study to graduate visa to skilled employment, permanent residency and ultimately citizenship as the migration system "working at its absolute best". If that is the pathway we want people to take, we should ask what makes it possible for them to walk it. Family stability is part of that answer. The commonwealth has said PhD students are in a different stage of life and has preserved family access for them. That distinction may make administration sense on paper, but family life does not necessarily follow the categories our visa system creates and nor should family unity feel more or less important because of a passport or a course code.

That brings me back to the word in this motion that matters enormously: "settlement". Settlement is not just employment; it is the school pick-up, knowing your neighbours, joining the local club and having people around you when life does not go to plan. It is the ordinary things that turn somewhere you live into somewhere that you belong. There is a continuum here: being welcomed, being settled and, ultimately, having a say. When people become permanent residents, work here and raise family here, there is a legitimate question about whether they should also have a say in the community they call home—and I have raised this question here before.

There is much in this motion that reflects an ambition I share: that Canberra should be a place where international students and skilled migrants can build meaningful, secure lives. But attraction and retention cannot be separated from family, belonging and settlement. If we ask people to study here, work here and eventually make Canberra home, we should care more about the skills they bring or the vacancies they fill. We need to care about the life they are trying to build. For me, the motion as it stands does not sufficiently grapple with this human element; hence my amendments to address these.

Speaking to those amendments, I would like to thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for picking up an errant letter. Letter A is missing from paragraph 2. I do not think it will substantially affect the matter, but I just would like to acknowledge Mr Werner-Gibbings is entirely correct. I hope that the ACT government continues to advocate to the commonwealth on migration and education settings so that we can keep the human reality at the centre of the conversation.

I seek leave to move my amendments together.

Leave granted.

MR BRADDOCK: I move:

1. After all words in paragraph (1)(f), insert:

“(g) international students can face particular challenges relating to mental health and wellbeing, social isolation, housing affordability, discrimination and racism, which can affect their experience of living and studying in Canberra;”.

2. After all words in paragraph (2)(e), insert:

“(f) recent Australian Government migration reforms will restrict the ability of a significant number of international students to be accompanied by family members, with potential consequences for student wellbeing and access to family support;”.

3. After all words in paragraph (3)(b), insert:

“(c) work with universities, international student representatives, health services and community organisations to identify and address gaps in accessible and affordable mental health and wellbeing services for international students, including current barriers to service access;”.

4. In paragraphs (2)(e), new (3)(e) and (3)(f), omit “ASEAN students”, substitute “students from ASEAN and Pacific nations”.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (3.33): I support this motion and the Greens’ amendments. International students make an enormous contribution to Canberra, not only through our economy and workforce but also through the diversity, energy and the community life they bring to our city. However, if we are serious about being Australia’s education capital, the benefits of international education should be felt across Canberra, including on the south side. Most higher education activity, both economic and social, remains concentrated in the north of the city, and it should be shared with Canberra’s south. Becoming used to studying in the south would help with people being comfortable with settling, working and socialising in the south. As we build on the strengths of higher education, we should consider how those strengths can be spread across Canberra.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (3.34): I rise in my capacity as the ACT Greens spokesperson for young people and education to speak to Mr Werner-Gibbing’s motion regarding international students and the amendments that the Greens are seeking to make to it. I would also like to mention that this excellent speech was written by one current university student and one quite recent graduate who feel very passionately about the topic. International students come to Canberra to enjoy studying in what we like to call Australia’s education capital. They travel far from home and away from family to pursue an education at our universities—and how lucky are we that they do that.

This motion conveys a sense of pride—pride in the fact that Canberra is home to approximately 20,000 international students every year and that they are an integral part of making Canberra’s university life and culture what it is renowned to be. The ACT Greens support the majority of this motion and support the affirmation of international students’ important role in our Canberra communities, especially in light of recent federal migration changes. These changes, which include restricting the ability of a significant number of international students to be accompanied by family members, have been extremely distressing for current international students and for those who are considering coming to study in Australia from overseas.

Mr Braddock has already outlined what this means on a real human level for migrants and international students—so I will not speak it too much. But I must acknowledge that these announcements are not just headlines for these students; they are changes that really affect their lives and, sadly, can politicise them. That is why I am very glad that this motion and our amendments are receiving support, hopefully, from all parties of the Assembly today. Our amendments seek to include the facts of federal reforms and

not paint a rosy picture about what they have meant for young people in our international students community. We have also sought to include Pasifika students who will receive exemptions from the newly-announced restrictions and recognise the important relationships that we hold with Pacific islands nations, their educational institutions and, of course, their students and their teachers.

But the real heart of our amendments seek to ensure that, first and foremost, international students are valued as people, as students, as community members, as neighbours and as friends. This is not to suggest that international students do not make up one of the ACT's largest export industries and have huge economic benefits for Australia and the territory; it is to say that that is not where their value lies. It is in their contribution to their community. It is to their personhood and in their just simply being here.

International students are a third of our tertiary students in Canberra, and our local communities would not be the same without them. We have a responsibility to ensure that, when we welcome them into education institutions here in Canberra, that we are supporting them properly. This is particularly important in the context of frightening far right sentiment and blatant racism, which tends to get an unsettling amount of air time in current times. We must recognise and action our responsibility to safeguard international students from this kind of harm and be real with ourselves about the current climate for international students. It is tough.

Imagine coming to Canberra to study with no friends or family to support you. Not only are you facing an entirely new educational challenge but also, in a new country, possibly a new language and in an entirely new culture that you are not familiar with. On top of this, you face a greater risk of discrimination and racism and, if you are a woman, a higher risk of physical and/or verbal abuse, sexual harassment and exclusion, and, when you do seek help, if you can find your footing in a foreign language, you are stuck trying to navigate a system you do not understand, choosing between options you cannot afford and worried that your help-seeking might impact your visa. When you do find options, you have to articulate your struggles in a different language to your own and, if you access university counselling, you are stuck trading affordability for support that extends little beyond completing your studies.

Research from Headspace determines that there are significant barriers to international students seeking and receiving mental health support, and we need to break down these barriers. This could even just look like ensuring international students are supported to access the supports currently only available to domestic students or coordinating across services to ensure they are a consider cohort in outreach efforts to young people. It is why we have added a call for the government to work with universities, international student representatives, health services and community organisations to identify and address gaps in accessible and affordable mental health and wellbeing services for international students, including current barriers to service access.

The last thing I want to briefly touch on, which speaks to a key happening that we have been running with students, is about student housing and about the state of university accommodation. During our stalls at UC and ANU market days and in conversations with wonderful UC, ANU, ACU and Young Greens networks, we have had a serious number of international students come up to us. That has included some international

students who want to actively jump on board with our campaign and see more affordable and liveable student housing options on campus, but it has also included students who are just distressed with their current living circumstances and are looking for assistance. Some that we have spoken to had less than a week to leave their current student accommodation and no clear guidance on who could help them.

International students are particularly vulnerable to the worst parts of student housing. Because they have to study a full-time load, that often comes at the expense of finding a job to support themselves with housing costs that have yet again increased well above inflation. They often have less time, less energy and less social support to advocate for themselves. When it comes to, frankly, awful maintenance records of big university housing providers, they are on the sharp edge of economic injustice in our unis, and we need to back them in better. All of this is to say that we strongly support Mr Braddock's amendments.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (3.40): Let me firstly say: I have no idea what Mr Werner-Gibbings was trying to say about giving me satisfaction. I do not know where he was going with that line. But, on the substance of this motion, let us start by saying that I love this city. My family has been here so long that our story is fundamentally so intertwined with Canberra's that I think I exhaust my team by dropping stories of my family's connection with different things that happened, different things that occurred and different places that we drive past—and I am going to do it again. My great-grandfather was a local farmer who attended the naming of Canberra, the very start of our city in a lot of ways. There was a community here already, but this was a change in direction that would build the city that we all have come to live in, know and love today. The stories that I read and hear of that time are of a community excited to welcome new Canberrans. It is a perspective that runs throughout our history, and I think it is really important that, as we look at questions like these that we are considering today, we maintain both a sense of building for the future for people who live here and that welcoming approach to people coming to our city and building the Canberra of tomorrow.

I want to touch on just one thing. I think the government needs to be pretty careful about what it claims about this Oxford Economics ranking that has been discussed in a couple of speeches today. I would encourage the government to read the whole Oxford Economics report rather than just repeating one narrow headline. One thing I love watching every year is how multiple cities get to claim that they have the best quality of life using different indexes. I am a bit biased, I love Canberra, and so I know which one I am coming out in favour of. But I do love that both Canberra and Melbourne have frequently both claimed the same title, because there are different ways to measure.

I also think that it is important, especially where both the mover and the Chief Minister have trumpeted the achievement of being ranked first on quality of life, to look at what that measure means and what the index says as a whole, because this quality of life category in the Oxford Economics Index is a fairly narrow composite measure. It includes income per person, income equality, life expectancy, housing expenditure, crime and access to recreational and cultural sites. On this last measure, in particular, Canberra's got a pretty good advantage simply by being the home of all of our national institutions. We have very high average incomes, which are driven substantially by the commonwealth public service. We have those cultural institutions that I have

mentioned, funded because Canberra is the national capital. Those are real advantages of living here. They are real advantages for Canberra, but they are certainly not something that the ACT government has done to create success.

There is an important problem with the way affordability is captured because Oxford Economics measures housing expenditure as a proportion of household disposable income. Canberra has high incomes as I have mentioned when you look at medians, and that helps the city score well even where the actual cost of housing and the wider costs of living are putting enormous pressure on households. It is very different from saying that Canberra is an inexpensive place to live. If the government wants to treat the Oxford Economics Index as its report card, it should probably look at the whole report, because Canberra might rank first on that narrow quality of life descriptor, but it ranks only 45th overall and, very importantly in the context of this discussion, Canberra ranks 211th in economics. Oxford's economics' assessment looks at things like economic growth, employment growth, economic stability and economic diversity—precisely the areas where Canberra needs to achieve better; precisely where we should be asking harder questions about Canberra's dependence on government spending, the strength of our private sector and whether we are creating enough opportunities for the future.

So, absolutely, we want to make sure that this is a place that people choose to stay and we want to make sure we have opportunities for today's Canberrans and tomorrow's Canberrans, but we do need to be upfront about exactly what that index really said.

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Trade, Investment and the Knowledge Economy, Minister for Tourism and Events, and Minister for Major Projects) (3.45): On the amendments, without pointing out the bleeding obvious, obviously the intent of the motion is going to the heart of one of the issues that Mr Cocks has just raised around diversifying the economy, and the most sensible way to do that is to focus on talented people that we can attract here and retain. That is the whole point of the motion. So, while it is always nice to get Mr Cocks's cheery view of the world, let's be clear that the motion is highlighting the liveability as a key point to drive our economic development agenda as well. I think that is pretty explicit. I thank Mr Braddock for his amendments and Mr Werner-Gibbings, again, for bringing the motion forward today.

Amendments agreed to.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (3.46): I thank everyone for the contributions: Mr Braddock, Mr Milligan, Mr Cocks, Miss Nuttall and Ms Carrick. I think Ms Castley did have one, but she might have been called away. And, very much indeed, I thank the Chief Minister for his support. On a more personal note, to Mr Nick Gonsalves, who is a soon to be as equally proud as Alicia Payne and I, as a graduate of the great Lake Tuggeranong College—and a long time and dependable Team Taimus volunteer, who this week is a work experience team member in my office: thank you, Nick, for your help with this speech. But also, and on *Hansard*, thank you for all your support since you wrote me a morale-boosting email out of the blue in late 2023, when you were a Year 9 student at Calwell High—time flies.

As Nick made the point to me, international students make Canberra a more diverse

city. The economic benefits of their presence are substantial—the social and cultural benefits equally so. They bring different perspectives, different experiences and different ideas. They help strengthen our multicultural community and deepen Canberra's connections with the rest of the world. Their contribution extends far beyond the classroom.

As a local member for Brindabella, I have been thinking about what this issue means for Tuggeranong, particularly considering the absence of a university campus in my electorate. Sometimes when people hear discussions about international students, they assume the benefits are limited to areas only around university campuses. They see it as an issue that concerns only certain parts of the city. That is not the reality. The benefits of international education and skilled migration are felt right across Canberra. In Tuggeranong, international graduates and skilled migrants are helping deliver services that our community uses and relies upon every day. They work in health care, aged care, disability services, construction, hospitality, information technology and a range of other professional occupations. They are helping businesses grow; supporting our economy; and filling workplace shortages in sectors where employers often struggle to find enough workers.

Workforce shortages affect all of us. They can mean longer waiting times for healthcare services. They can create challenges for aged-care providers trying to fill shifts. They can slow down construction projects and place pressure on local businesses. When employers cannot find workers, the entire community feels the impact. That is why attracting and retaining talented people should be a priority for this Assembly. We ought to ensure that we are retaining graduates in areas of strategic importance to the territory. It strengthens our workforce. It allows us to be better placed moving forward. Every year thousands of students graduate from our educational institutions with skills that are in demand. Many of those students have already developed strong connections to Canberra. They have built friendships. They have established professional networks. They have become part of our community. For many of them, Canberra already feels like home.

This motion asks the government to continue building on that success by advocating for policy settings that recognise Canberra's unique circumstances; by working with universities and employers to retain talented graduates; by promoting Canberra as Australia's education capital; and by ensuring that we continue attracting the people that will help shape our city's future. This motion is laying down a unanimous marker of the ACT Assembly's principles and policy approach to international migration, skilled migration and international students—a policy approach that is good for our economy, good for our community and consistent with the values that have helped make Canberra such a successful and welcoming city.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

Housing affordability—portable rental bond scheme

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (3.51): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

- (a) around one third of Canberrans are renters and they are paying record high rents, with the median weekly rent reaching \$710 for a house and \$580 for a unit in June 2026;
 - (b) rental bond payments in the ACT are generally 4-weeks rent, meaning the median bond payment required is \$2,840 for a house and \$2,320 for a unit;
 - (c) the median personal weekly income in the ACT is \$1,158, meaning a regular person could need to pay more than a fortnight's worth of take-home pay to finance a bond;
 - (d) when moving between rental properties, renters are required to pay a bond upfront while waiting for their existing bond to be returned;
 - (e) the need to finance a second rental bond is difficult for many Canberrans, especially as cost of living pressures increase;
 - (f) a portable rental-bond scheme lets renters transfer their existing bond to a new rental property;
 - (g) portable rental-bond schemes are available in both NSW and Victoria and a scheme is being introduced in South Australia; and
 - (h) any measure to reduce moving costs between rental properties would have benefits to different members of our community, including young people, women leaving violent relationships and low-income renters; and
- (2) calls on the Government to:
- (a) develop and implement a portable rental-bond scheme to allow renters to transfer an existing rental bond from one tenancy to another free of charge, commencing by July 2028; and
 - (b) report back to the Assembly with progress on the above on the second-last sitting day of February 2027, including an analysis of:
 - (i) legislative and policy change required to implement a portable rental-bond scheme; and
 - (ii) challenges and opportunities to implementing an ICT system to support a portable rental-bond scheme.

I am speaking today to introduce this motion which calls on the ACT government to introduce a portable rental bond scheme here in Canberra. This motion does not pretend to address all the problems that have contributed to the housing crisis this country faces. It does not even pretend to address all the problems faced by renters in the ACT. But a portable rental bond scheme is a small step and a commonsense solution to an issue that is faced by renters every day here in the city.

The challenge faced by renters is profound. Around a third of our neighbours here in Canberra are renters and they are paying record high rents. The median weekly rent in Canberra is approaching \$710 for a house and \$580 for a unit, as at the end of the last financial year. An increasing number of Canberrans are in rental stress, and people below the median wage can pay half of their take-home pay or more in rent alone. This level of unaffordability is a natural outcome of a system that prioritises homeowners and investors over renters and people doing it tough. There are people already having trouble meeting their week-to-week obligations.

Anyone in this chamber would know how stressful and disruptive moving house can be. Sometimes moving house can be the start of an exciting new chapter, but sometimes, and especially for renters, the end of the lease does not come at a time of your choosing. It can be due to a relationship breakdown, an employment ending, rent that has been hiked up so much that there is a need to move somewhere cheaper, or a landlord who has decided that market conditions are right to sell. Moving into a new tenancy can be a serious financial burden. There is a need to find a new bond, pay rent in advance, pay whatever moving costs are required, and, in a tight rental market, there is sometimes the awkward situation of paying rent in two places at once to manage the end of a lease. For some tenants, the costs are not just about money; it can also mean time away from work, and that is a further financial burden for our neighbours on a casual wage. The current system forces renters to pull together money for a new bond while their money is still tied up from a previous rental. And we are not talking about small amounts of money; we are talking about thousands of dollars.

The proposal put forward by this motion alleviates just one aspect of the up-front financial burden faced by renters moving into a new tenancy. A portable rental bond scheme is not an overly complex policy matter. A scheme like this allows a renter to transfer a rental bond from an existing rental property to a new rental property. It recognises that a tenant has already put money into the system. Tenants and landlords already have experience of engaging with the ACT Rental Bonds Office.

New South Wales and Victoria have introduced portable rental bond schemes, and South Australia have announced that they will be implementing a scheme soon. I am really happy to quote the New South Wales Labor Minister for Housing and Minister for Homelessness on the scheme in her jurisdiction. She says:

Amid a housing and cost of living crisis we must explore every option to alleviate the financial pressure renters face when moving house. The harsh reality is that the high cost of moving, especially having to pay a new bond before the old one is refunded, can push people to the brink of homelessness. The portable bonds scheme is an important and practical way to help ease this pressure renters feel.

The Victorian Labor Minister for Renters, Paul Edbrooke, says:

This is a practical reform that is making life easier and more affordable for renters.

We built this scheme so no renter has to choose between paying a new bond and covering next month's rent.

The South Australian Labor government has proudly announced their Portable Rental Bonds Scheme as part of their most recent budget. They cite it as an important step for providing financial support to renters in their state.

This is an opportunity for the ACT to build on our history of progressive rental reforms and leading on rental affordability and fairness. Labor governments all over the country are doing it, but here it is taking the Greens to bring it to the floor of the Assembly. For a government that proclaims to be the most progressive in Australia, it is pretty baffling to experience the lacklustre from members of government when we have explored this proposal for the ACT.

I would reflect that the 25 members of this house are very privileged. I would not wish to speculate on individual circumstances, but I know at least a couple of members are current renters. I can imagine that renting is probably a pretty distant memory for many of us. I ask members of this house to ensure that we are connected to the experience of the people we represent when we consider this motion.

I have outlined the challenges facing renters already in this speech, but I would like to speak to some of the benefits that the scheme might bring to some of our neighbours here in the ACT. While a third of households are renting, particular groups are more impacted. Young people are much more likely to be renters and, with the state of the housing market, they are likely to be renting for much longer than any of us did. Nationally, nearly half of the people aged 15 to 24 have moved three or more times in the previous five years.

I had the pleasure of listening to Amy Kilpatrick, from Care Financial and Care Consumer Law, speak movingly to the media this morning on the housing challenges facing women leaving violent relationships. She said that, in some cases of coercive control, she sees the involvement of a violent partner who chooses to withhold a bond at the end of a tenancy. A scheme like this is truly gender-responsive policy. Women often cite housing costs as a determining factor in returning to violence, and this scheme could make a real difference in the lives of some of our most vulnerable community members.

When we have spoken to renters, housing advocates and people supporting renters in times of financial stress, they fully backed this idea. They acknowledged that it will not solve all the issues of rental stress, but it will provide some practical support and relief to the really hard bits of dealing with the stress of moving. There have been some concerns raised about this scheme. It raises the question of whether this is the right time or the right place for a scheme like this. Thankfully, the purpose of this motion is to commence the work and to understand how we can best deliver this scheme.

I will speak to three issues that have been raised. The first issue is cost. In a tight fiscal environment, the Greens acknowledge that we need to make careful choices about investing in our public services. I would bring the Assembly's attention to the nearly \$5½ million that was earned from the investment of renters' bonds in 2024-25. Under the Residential Tenancies Act 1997, this revenue is transferred to a specific trust account and must be spent on administration of residential tenancy systems, tenancy support services and housing initiatives. This recognises that the bond money belongs to tenants; it is their money. What better outcome than spending it on a system that makes their experience of the return of bonds better and more efficient? In Victoria, the Portable Rental Bond Scheme has been paid entirely out of the equivalent trust account that holds investment income from tenants' bonds. In New South Wales, Smart Rental Bonds—in a state with eight million people compared to the ACT's 500,000 people—costs \$6.6 million; and in South Australia they have committed \$7 million over four years to establish their scheme.

The second issue is the time it might take to do the ICT implementation right. I acknowledge the importance of developing a secure digital system if we are going to ask it to handle thousands of dollars of tenants' hard-earned money. My office had the

pleasure of meeting with a Canberra based company, NCS Australia, which developed the system for Smart Rental Bonds, the New South Wales scheme. They talked us through some of the issues involved in ICT implementation, and we appreciate it can be a significant undertaking. However, renters speaking to my office have told me their experience leads them to believe the processes used at the ACT Rental Bonds remain firmly paper based. If a digital uplift is needed to happen anyway, let's make sure we are investing in the benefits of a digital transition for renters and tenants.

The third issue deals with what happens in instances where there might be the need to draw on the initial bond if there is a dispute or a debt. These are all issues that can be engaged with through the policy development process. These are issues that have been resolved in schemes in other jurisdictions. In looking at barriers, I ask members to think about the reality of the status quo, where the issue of outstanding debts is most often borne by renters themselves, who are not provided access to their money if there is a dispute with their landlord. All the while, the government holds onto their money.

The response to the idea of a portable rental bond scheme has been overwhelmingly positive in the community. Particularly renters can see this could make a real difference. There is policy work to be done about how we can finalise a portable rental bond scheme and how it might work here in the ACT. I think that, in a housing and cost-of-living crisis, we have an obligation to move quickly to do the design work and prioritise an idea that could make a real difference.

Some proposed amendments are circulating. I will address those as we progress. I would particularly like to acknowledge the positive engagement with Mr Cocks's office as we have looked at this motion. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (4.02): I came to the experience of renting a house pretty late in life, and it happened only because I had a property literally falling down around my ears. It is not an experience I would choose. Renting is pretty unfun and it is extraordinarily expensive. If you ask someone about their experience of simply trying to find a rental place, there are stories—and I will give my own—of walking into a place you are probably able to afford. It is smaller than you would like, but you will probably be able to make it work. “At least it's got a garage I can put my corflutes in.” After queuing up behind probably a hundred people and saying, “This one looks affordable. It might actually make sense,” you then walk through the door to see the mould on the walls, the paint peeling off and the utterly appalling conditions that someone expects a renter to live in. Suddenly, that rental you thought was going to be affordable does not stack up.

I walked out of that place behind someone far less privileged than I am, and they were on the phone to their partner saying, “This is another one. We could afford it, but we couldn't live here.” With that experience, I am glad that I was there and had the privilege to see it, because it really drives home how unaffordable our rental market is. It is pretty tough, and that may be a bigger understatement than I have made before. It is pretty tough trying to rent a place and actually afford to get by. The proportion of your income that you watch walking out the door to finance someone else's mortgage and the proportion of your income that goes to just keeping a roof over your head hurts.

That is the starting point for the motion that the Greens have brought forward today.

I thank Ms Vassarotti. It gives us a chance to reflect on that utter inequity—that feeling that you just cannot get ahead. How can you possibly afford to buy a home if you cannot even pay the rent? That is the reality that renters in Canberra deal with. It is the reality that renters across Australia deal with, but the rents here are pretty ridiculous.

Then, when you are trying to get in—when you are trying to put your foot through the door after you have managed to find a place that is actually tolerable to live in, and after you have managed to find a place that you will be able to afford from week to week—you are hit with the bond. That bond is another absolute pain. It hurts when you are asked to pay thousands of dollars before you can even walk through the door. The bond is that high because it is a multiple of the rents.

So we have to deal with the barriers to people having secure housing. We have to be able to deal with giving people the opportunity to do well. As I have said before, if you do not have security around you—and that includes the security of a home—how can you make your way in the world? How can you actually aspire to do better if you cannot keep a roof above your head and when you cannot even get into a rental property?

I am going to move an amendment shortly. Right at the heart of that amendment—what I put forward as a new clause (2)—is a bit about exactly what has happened. I point out the amount that rent has increased over the past decade. I have chosen some relatively conservative measures to make sure that they align with the numbers that the Greens have put forward—about a 50 per cent increase. The specific numbers are there. On the government's data, it is higher. The cost of living and the cost of housing cannot be separated, because it is the cost of housing, more than anything else, that drives that cost of living crisis. The cost of groceries is pretty high as well and the cost of fuel is ridiculous, but those costs come after you pay to keep a roof over your head.

What strikes me is how much of that money is actually coming back to the government. I have referred to the increases in land tax in my amendment. We were looking through some of the government data recently, running the calculations for some of the properties that are available to rent. It is not hard to find a property where about 50 per cent of the rent is, in effect, coming back to the government through land tax, rates and levies, which is why we, on this side of the chamber, keep trying to raise the impact that rates and levies have. Rates drive land tax, and land tax and rates impact everyone. It does not matter whether you rent or whether you own your own home; those costs are borne by every person living in Canberra.

To my mind, that is the starting point. That is what drives the need to somehow enable people to navigate the bond difficulty, because rents are so high and rents are being driven higher by the increasing complexity of the regulations, the land tax, and everything that the government has done over time, well-intentioned as it may have been. That impacts the ability of rental providers to have a house on the market. As we head into a world where negative gearing winds back even more, we are at risk of seeing that become even worse. Where a rental provider can offset losses on a rental property now, they will have to positively gear. They will have to charge more for a property than they outlay in their costs. There are exceptions in that legislation—I accept that—but, for any new property, that is the world we are moving into. Over time, that is the change that we will see. The change might not be overnight, but it is coming.

As for the portable rental bond scheme, it is very important to proceed along an evidence based policy approach. I have argued in this place for a very long time that we need to use evidence based policy. I love the enthusiasm that the Greens have brought to this policy, but, in the information that I was presented with, the evidence is not quite there yet for me to back this whole-heartedly. We were not able to see the full costs of implementation. We were not able to see exactly how much the government would be exposed to risk in terms of shifting liabilities. What is more, there is a whole range of things already in existence which could potentially be adapted to address this issue.

I am right with you on this issue. We have to deal with the problem of renters being unable to move into a home and then being unable to move between homes. The impact of that rental bond is magnified when you need to move out of one place and into another. That need can be driven by all sorts of things. It can be driven by a share house breaking down or it can be driven by a marriage breaking down. There are all sorts of things which drive the need to move between places. It may be driven by a rental provider deciding they can no longer afford to provide the home. But I want to see the evidence that says: this is the solution that will work.

The Greens have pointed to examples in other jurisdictions. I have to note that those are very new schemes. They are brand new. There is no evidence available yet that says that this is going to work in the way intended. We have an opportunity to learn from those other jurisdictions and we can watch the early evidence. I want to see us acting on early evidence, but there is not enough yet.

I need to know exactly how much of the bill we are asking the government to foot. Exactly how much is it going to cost? The amendments that I will bring forward today do that. They call on the government to investigate in detail and provide the Assembly with the options to reduce the financial burden on ACT renters who are required to pay a new rental bond while waiting for an existing rental bond to be returned; a portable rental bond scheme, absolutely; measures to accelerate the return of existing rental bonds; temporary or bridging arrangements; changes to or expansion of the existing ACT Rental Bond Help arrangements—some of my colleagues were surprised that this thing even existed. And I am asking for the government to report back, within six months, to this Assembly and tell us what the evidence is; what the risks are; what legislative, policy, administrative and ICT changes are required; the costs; the benefits; the risks; the potential unintended consequences; the financial risk that is transferred; the treatment of disputed claim; interactions with existing arrangements; evidence about what is going on in other jurisdictions; and an implementation plan to make sure this is implemented in the current term. We cannot put things off into the never-never. We cannot keep on waiting. The pain that people are experiencing in the rental market is real today.

With that, I move the amendment circulated in name:

Omit all text after paragraph (1)(c), substitute:

“(2) further notes that:

- (a) according to some data, median weekly asking rents in Canberra increased have increased by approximately 4-9 per cent for houses and 45 per cent for units over the decade;

- (b) over the same period, the ACT Government has progressively increased the taxation, regulatory and compliance burden associated with providing residential rental housing, including through land tax, restrictions on rental increases, changes to tenancy termination arrangements and minimum energy efficiency requirements; and
 - (c) measures seeking to address pressures experienced by renters should consider both direct assistance and the effect of government policy settings on the cost and supply of rental housing;
- (3) 2 calls on the ACT Government to:
- (a) investigate options to reduce the financial burden on ACT renters who are required to pay a new rental bond while waiting for an existing rental bond to be returned, including, but not limited to:
 - (i) a portable rental bond scheme;
 - (ii) measures to accelerate the return of existing rental bonds where there is no outstanding claim or dispute;
 - (iii) temporary or bridging arrangements to address the period between paying of a new rental bond and return of an existing rental bond;
 - (iv) changes to, or expansion of, the existing ACT Rental Bond Help arrangements; and
 - (v) other legislative, administrative or financial measures that would reduce the need for renters to finance two rental bonds at the same time;
 - (b) report back to the Assembly within six months, with the report to include, for each option, assessment of:
 - (i) legislative, policy, administrative and ICT changes;
 - (ii) costs, benefits, risks and potential unintended consequences;
 - (iii) financial risk transferred to the Territory;
 - (iv) treatment of disputed claims, outstanding tenant liabilities and any debts that may become owing by renters to the Territory;
 - (v) interactions with existing arrangements; and
 - (vi) evidence from initiatives operating in other jurisdictions
 - (vii) implementation planning for the current term of the Legislative Assembly, including timeframes.”.

MS CASTLEY (Yerrabi) (4.15): Thank you, Ms Vassarotti, for bringing this motion. I completely understand where the Greens are coming from with this motion. Renters all over the territory—and the country—are struggling with the cost of living. It is, easily, one of the biggest issues in the community, and I welcome anyone who brings forward ideas on how we can ease their burden. That said, we do need to be mindful of the consequences that an idea will have, and whether or not it will actually make life better.

It is not worth us doing something on housing or for renters, if the change is not going to create any tangible benefits. And especially not if the idea also creates undesirable consequences. That is the concern that I have with this proposal. I am not sure whether it is going to create a tangible benefit for those who really need it. That is mostly

because we already have a government scheme providing loans for rental bonds. The scheme allows renters to access two-year interest-free loans, and is open to individuals with an annual income of \$122,000 or less.

For those who are eligible for bond loans, the benefits of the Greens' proposal are likely to be pretty minimal because the government already offers an option that is effective and better suited to those people's needs—which means the benefits of the Greens' proposal are going to be realised by people with annual incomes above \$122,000. Those people have take-home pay of at least \$3,500 per fortnight, which means they can comfortably absorb the cost of a four-week rental bond in less than one paycheque, if that is the way they roll. I am not convinced that it will make a tangible difference for people on relatively high incomes.

But the Greens' proposal will come with other consequences. After all, bonds are there to provide investors with financial security when tenants damage a property and refuse to provide compensation. That compensation will still need to be provided, but the bond will have been moved by the time the compensation claims are made. In other jurisdictions that have adopted portable bonds, the government has had to step in and provide that security. The government will have to provide compensation to landlords, and it will have to pursue those tenants who may have caused damages. This activity is not free.

The Victorian Commissioner for Better Regulation estimated portable bonds will cost that government \$6.4 million per year, in operating expenses and debt write-offs. Given the state of our budget, it seems unlikely that our government can simply absorb these costs, so we will be left imposing even higher taxes—either on tenants or, more likely, property investors—and all to provide a minor benefit for some high-income tenants. While I am deeply sympathetic to the plight of tenants—after all, I have two kids, both renting, and I see the impact that this has on their lives and their finances—I am not sure this proposal will create tangible benefits for them.

If we really want to help renters, the best thing we can do is build more housing. Proof of that is visible around the country. If you look at prices and rents in Sydney and Melbourne over the last decade, there is a huge divergence between them. Prices have been rising in Sydney and falling in Melbourne. That is not because of population growth—in fact, Melbourne's population is growing faster than Sydney's—but because of supply. Melbourne has massively expanded its housing stock over a decade, while Sydney has stood still. And that is reflected in the different rents that people pay in each city.

Peter Tulip and Trent Saunders published the definitive research on this, while at the RBA in 2019. They essentially found that a one per cent increase in the number of homes means a 2.5 per cent decrease in the cost of housing, including prices and rents.

In local terms, that means an extra 2,000 dwellings can drive down rents by \$750 a year, on average. That is real, permanent cost-of-living relief for every single tenant in the ACT.

If you really want to help renters, the focus must be on boosting housing supply. That means planning on regulatory reform; it means tax reform; and it means land release.

That is how we get supply up and rents down, and how we build a better Canberra, more affordable for all Canberrans.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (4.20): I want to sincerely thank Ms Vassarotti for bringing forward this excellent motion today. The whole point of our role as politicians in this place is to help people, but I have got to say, this motion in particular made me go, "Oh god yeah! That would have been amazing to have in place last time we moved." A portable rental bond scheme would make such a clear, tangible difference to renters' economic security—and that is something that we desperately need during a cost-of-living crisis. Now, I rent because I still cannot afford home ownership as a politician. The only time I have had to move between rental properties, I have gotten out of rental duress because I had been lucky enough to get elected. That is not the economic reality for most of my generation.

Interestingly, I had a friend who had to take out a loan from the ACT government to cover the second bond, which she then had to pay off over the course of the year because she could not pay for that on top of moving costs, and her old property manager had not yet paid back her first bond. She had no savings moving into the new house. She was earning just enough to support her study, but it was incredibly tight. She was not earning more than \$120,000, just in case anyone was wondering. She was paying rent, food and transport. Paying off this bond really did not leave any wiggle room. In her words, shared generously, "If you do not have, like, \$3,000 in savings lying around for the new bond and moving, then rip, Bozo."

She is absolutely right, because moving us around is not just a double bond. It is double rent for the overlapping period; it is removalists costs; it is any pest control; utility connections; from personal experience, internet installations; and it is any new furnishings. And it is rinse-and-repeat every two to three years because our system is not set up for the provision of homes, as is our human right; it is set up for the commodification of our basic needs.

You will often hear outcries that, "Oh you know, we already have the best rental protections in the country. Do we really need to do anything else?" We need to do more because it is clear that "best in the country" does not mean enough. Far from it. After our previous Greens Attorney-General, Mr Shane Rattenbury got the ball rolling on minimum standards for rental properties, Labor appears dangerously close to letting that ball roll through to the keeper.

There was a listening report that told us that renters wanted better. They overwhelmingly wanted minimum standards for things as simple as deadlocks, structurally sound and waterproof properties, adequate ventilation, minimum energy efficiency, lighting. I think it is honestly alarming that a far lower percentage of landlords supported these—sometimes less than half of the landlords who responded, as was the case for deadlocks and energy efficiency—and landlords' nervousness tended to come from these standards "costing too much".

Who here, in this chamber, would be prepared to live in a home where you were not guaranteed a deadlock or adequate ventilation? Would that feel fair to you? I bring up minimum standards in a conversation about rental bonds, because I need everyone in this room to understand that the cards are still very much stacked against renters.

A portable bond scheme that means the third of Canberrans who rent—or thereabouts—are not out-of-pocket thousands of dollars unnecessarily every three years or so, seems pretty fair to ask. I urge the government and this parliament to support the third of our community that does rent in this city.

I do not think we can afford to be kicking the can down the road any further. The longer we wait, the longer our community pays double what they need to. So again, thank you so much to Ms Vassarotti for bringing forward such an excellent, sensible motion, which absolutely will help people. I urge all members in this place to make their decisions with their renting constituents in mind.

MRS MORRIS (Brindabella) (4.24): The housing crisis is both a moral crisis and an affordability one, because behind every discussion about rental affordability are Canberrans trying to keep a roof over their heads today, while saving for a more secure future.

As an experienced renter—having moved out of home and leaving South Africa, coming back to Australia, being a very broke university student trying to put a roof over my head and then, ultimately, trying to find a home where we can grow a family—I know the uncertainty that comes with renting. I worry about young people who work hard and save, and yet increasingly believe a home of their own will never be within their reach.

Over recent years, the ACT government has restricted rent increases and imposed additional standards on landlords. They were well-intended moves by the government, and no one can argue against tenants deserving safe and comfortable homes, but good intentions do not remove the need to consider the costs and the consequences.

When the government keeps increasing the cost and complexity of providing a rental home, it risks driving investment elsewhere and reducing renters' choice. The Real Estate Institute of the ACT has warned that regulatory and tax burdens are contributing to landlords selling up—and we should listen and pay attention to that.

In the ACT, according to the ACT government's own bond data, average weekly rents have risen by more than 70 per cent over the last decade. Whatever the intention behind individual reforms, affordability remains a serious problem, and all of us in this place need to consider carefully whether we are making the problem better or worse.

Mr Speaker, it can be argued that we are developing an over-reliance on build-to-rent developments to fill the gap of a shrinking traditional rental market. Build-to-rent, of course, can contribute to much-needed housing, but developments charging a premium for additional services and amenities will not be affordable for everyone. They cannot substitute for a broad rental market with homes at prices that ordinary Canberrans can afford today, while building a deposit for the future.

Cotality's analysis earlier this year found that, with a 20 per cent deposit, mortgage repayments on a typical Woden Valley unit could be lower than the rent. Yet finding that deposit is precisely the obstacle. The more household income is swallowed by rent, the less remains to save. People can find themselves paying enough to service a

mortgage without being able to take the first steps towards owning a home.

Home ownership is one of the most important determinants of whether someone retires comfortably. Alongside superannuation, a home owned outright provides financial security when working income ends. For someone still renting, that substantial weekly expense continues throughout their retirement. Helping Canberrans realise their dream of owning their own home is a social, economic and moral imperative, and every housing policy should face a simple test: Does it help put more homes within reach or does it make housing harder and more expensive to provide?

We need more homes for renters and a realistic pathway to ownership for those who want it. That means making it easier to build and invest, and judging policy by the security and affordability that it delivers. I thank Ms Vassarotti for bringing this motion to the attention of the Assembly, and I thank other members for their contributions and the points they have raised—many of which are very valuable and worthy of consideration. And I thank Mr Cocks for his very sensible amendments that he has circulated.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (4.29): I thank Ms Vassarotti for bringing forward this motion today. This is a positive measure that I hope the ACT government can implement, and I think the context for this motion is as important as the calls it contains. As the motion notes, Canberra has a significant number of renters. Many of them are in my electorate. At the last census, over 43 per cent of households in Kurrajong were renters, well above the ACT and national average of around 31 per cent. With rents at record highs in the ACT and still climbing and the cost-of-living crisis impacting people's ability to make ends meet, especially our most vulnerable community members, anything this Assembly can do to help make the lives of those Canberrans a little easier is absolutely worthy of our time and attention.

For many renters, moving homes comes with a lot of stress and a significant cost, of course. Before receiving the bond back from a current property, renters are usually required to pay a new bond on their next rental, so this essentially means having to find thousands of dollars, sometimes on relatively short notice, while they have a similar amount of money tied up in the ACT rental bond system. While a couple of thousand dollars for a bond might not be stressful to find for those of us lucky enough to be in this Assembly, it is a very significant sum for members of our community on lower incomes, people on welfare programs, young people and those in financial stress.

While we do not have housing mobility data specific to the ACT that my team could find, in putting forward a portable rental bond scheme in New South Wales, the New South Wales government noted that of their 2.7 million households around 330,000 households move each year, with rental tenancies lasting less than two years on average. That equates to 12 per cent of New South Wales households moving annually, noting that mobility amongst renters is of course far higher than among owner-occupiers, and we do not have the renter-specific numbers.

Clearly, a lot of renters move frequently, meaning they are frequently squeezed for cash flow as they try to pull together thousands of dollars for an additional bond payment. Many of the members of our community who are most heavily impacted by this challenge are some of the people we speak most often about needing to support in this

place—people choosing between medicine and food, between rent and heating or cooling, people living in significant housing stress while moving from rental to rental due to the significant barriers to accessing secure, stable housing here in the ACT.

An Anglicare report from March of this year found that less than one per cent of all rental listings in the ACT and Queanbeyan were both affordable and appropriate across all different household types and that there were zero affordable, appropriate properties for people living on JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, parenting payments, the Age Pension or the Disability Support Pension. This is not just about bonds; it is about how financially stretched renters really are in the ACT, which is exacerbated when they move house, and what their government can do to help them. Both New South Wales and Victoria—and soon South Australia—have identified this as a cost-of-living issue with an obvious solution and are implementing schemes to make bond transfers easier, reduce moving costs and provide practical cost-of-living relief for renters.

Importantly, as we explore these reforms, we must keep in mind that this should not remove appropriate protections for landlords or their entitlement to successful bond claims, especially after a bond transfer has taken place. Though I acknowledge that this element will add administrative load to our bond scheme and the public service, given the cost-of-living stress currently on our community, I believe this idea should be investigated thoroughly. I would also note that the territory in the 2024-25 financial year received almost \$5.5 million in interest earnings from the ACT government's rental bond account. This money has previously been used to fund services like the tenants advice service provided by Legal Aid, administration of the rental bond scheme itself and rental dispute resolution in ACAT. Given that this government is earning interest from the holding of people's bonds, most of which are returned without claim or dispute, perhaps part of this interest could be used towards addressing the issue identified by Ms Vassarotti in her motion today.

I understand that the cost of underwriting bonds may be a reason this specific measure might not be affordable, and this is touched on—or responded to, I suppose—in the amendments that we are debating. In the government response to my February 2026 early childhood motion they indicated that the ACT is the only jurisdiction without a fine enforcement agency, which is part of the reason that our early childhood regulator has never imposed a fine prescribed under the national law. I hope the government's inability to recover debts or concerns with recovering debts are not what is holding us back from an important reform, and if this is the case, the government really needs to rectify this, as a broader priority.

I would also note that both New South Wales and Victoria have implemented measures to make this reform affordable to them, noting the interest earned on holding bonds, the introduction of a small fee to use the program as a form of cost recovery, as well as the relatively small number of cases where the government is actually at risk of being in a debt recovery position. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of bond repayments, as I have mentioned, are resolved by mutual agreement between the landlord and tenant without dispute.

While I do understand that the set-up of these types of measures can be expensive and I have some sympathy to that argument in a constrained fiscal environment, I am also wary of allowing the territory's constrained fiscal environment to turn any sensible

proposal that could improve people's lives here in the ACT, especially those who are most vulnerable in our community, into an automatic no.

The question is not whether the reform has a cost. Almost every worthwhile reform has a cost. The question is whether the benefits justify the costs, and in this case it is whether the risk and cost of a small number of disputed claims outweighs the benefit to thousands of renters who use our bond system every year, which is why I am supporting this motion and again want to thank Ms Vassarotti for bringing it to the Assembly. As a jurisdiction that has often led the nation in tenancy reform, I hope the ACT government will be willing to explore and carefully consider options to deliver meaningful relief for local renters in this area.

What matters is that the issue identified by this motion is fixed in an appropriate way. Given that, I support this, with the amendments put forward by Mr Cocks to explore portable bond schemes and any other appropriate options to address this problem. This makes sense to me, and they are, as Mrs Morris indicated, drafted as very sensible amendments. I would say, however, just briefly, that in Mr Cocks's remarks and amendments to this motion there may be a slightly flawed logic at play. Reflecting on the notes section, Mr Cocks has mentioned government policies that indirectly place pressure on rents, including land tax, which I understand—I take that point—but also mentions in the calls government policies that are directly targeted at supporting renters, like restrictions on rental increases and rent determination protections. I am not sure you can argue that policies supporting renters that are negatively impacting landlords may be doing so in a way that harms renters or imply, perhaps indirectly, that things like restrictions on rental increases are actually bad for renters because they are bad for landlords and everything trickles down. But I also get it, and that Mr Cocks wanted to make sure that there was a nod to the landlords in the motion, which is what the notes look like to me, but not that—

Mr Cocks: Point of order, Mr Speaker: I think that may be personal reflection.

MR SPEAKER: I do not think it is a point of order, Mr Cocks. I think he is debating the point.

MR EMERSON: I am happy to withdraw nonetheless. In any case, the calls are what matter, and I think the calls here make sense, so I am very happy to support them.

Ms Castley spoke about the rental bond help scheme as a solution to this problem. It was touched on in Mr Cocks's amendments as well. I think more people would use this scheme if they were aware of it. I am certainly someone who has been eligible for this, having been a renter that was below the income thresholds, and had no idea it existed. There is also I think an opportunity there to broaden community awareness of that scheme that is already in place.

I note that we are not up to it, but I am comfortable with Ms Cheyne's amendment to provide a little extra time to get this done properly because I think this is an important area of reform that is of critical importance to many people across this community, so I am supportive of the government doing it and doing it right.

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General,

Minister for City and Government Services, and Minister for Transport) (4.38): I move the following amendment to Mr Cocks's proposed amendment:

In paragraph (3)(b) omit "six months", substitute "nine months".

As has been I think really eloquently pointed out by all speakers today—I will not repeat it as much as my feelings and heart are right there—there is a period for a renter when they are moving home that their existing bond remains tied up while a new bond must be paid. As we have heard, for someone already facing removalists, cleaning costs, connection fees and the disruption of moving, finding another full bond can be a serious financial burden. The government does accept that this is a real problem, and we do want to address it. What we do not accept is the suggestion that there is one self-evident solution, that it is simple to implement and that anything short of immediately committing to it amounts to bureaucratic malaise. The Greens have described portable bonds as a simple, commonsense solution. The concept is simple, the scheme is not.

While there were some quotes from a Labor New South Wales minister, I would note that there are other quotes, also immediately available, where New South Wales Labor ministers described the scheme as complex. I note that it has been delayed. The concept is simple, the scheme is not, because the moment that we say, "Just roll the bond over," important questions arise. What happens if the former lessor later makes a successful claim against the original bond? Who pays that claim and carries the financial risk? What happens if the renter cannot repay the money? How would the scheme work when people leave a share house for different properties? How do we ensure that someone leaving a tenancy because of domestic or family violence is not excluded? What happens when the existing bond was funded through a government loan? How are disputes, hardship and tenant debts managed? What will the necessary administration, debt recovery and ICT systems cost? They are not excuses; they are the scheme. Once you get beyond the slogan, someone has to decide what happens when the first landlord makes a claim. Somebody has to decide who carries that financial risk. Somebody has to build the IT system. Somebody has to establish the debt recovery arrangements. Somebody has to determine the treatment of cotenancies, hardship and family violence. And somebody has to pay for it. This is not bureaucracy getting in the way of policy; it is the work required to turn policy into something that actually functions.

Let me be clear: supporting the principle at a Labor party conference—I personally endorsed this motion—does not answer these implementation questions. Indeed, if the Greens believe that the only obstacle to this reform is bureaucratic lethargy, then they should explain why they did not overcome that obstacle when they were around the cabinet table. This is not a gotcha. I know there will be exasperation. It is not as if the Greens were standing outside government looking in during the last Assembly. They were members of a shared government. Ms Vassarotti herself was the Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services. Mr Rattenbury was the Attorney-General and Minister for Consumer Affairs. It is not a gotcha; it is stressing that the more plausible explanation is the one before us today. The idea is attractive. We support the objective, but the implementation is genuinely complex.

That is why we support the Liberal amendment, subject to a nine-month reporting period. The amendment asks the government to investigate the problem and possible solutions rather than assuming the answer. I think this is somewhat of a theme that has

emerged over the last two weeks especially: the Greens have come into this place and outside this place and suggested that they are flexible, but I can tell you that on this they are not flexible—portable bonds or no. “It must be portable bonds. Portable bonds is the answer,” but it might not be—it just might not be. I do not see why it is so unreasonable to confirm whether it is the answer or if there are other options. This is the kind of negotiation that the Greens have been protesting for the last two weeks, and it is really frustrating. It is not the Greens that I remember or the Greens that I have worked with over the last 10 years.

So portable bonds, yes, but also faster refunds, bridging arrangements, changes to rental bond help, including better promoting it, and other options that could prevent renters from having to finance two bonds at once. Portable bonds may form part of the answer, but they might not. We should not decide the architecture of a scheme before understanding who it will help, who it may exclude, what risks it creates and what it will cost, yet the Greens’ original motion is asking us to do just that. It beggars belief that it is that or nothing, that the Greens have greatest policy idea, detailed in the media release—“Here you go government, you implement it, because our way is the only way.” It is not how a minority parliament or government should work. I really hope that this is not a sign of things to come. It certainly was not what I expected from the Greens or from Ms Vassarotti.

Indeed the interstate experience demonstrates why all of this work is necessary. Victoria’s scheme commenced on 1 July. It costs renters \$25 and generally requires the same renters to be on the old and the new bonds. It excludes some share house moves and does not allow the transfer of bonds funded through a Homes Victoria loan. New South Wales launched its scheme statewide one week ago, after it had been delayed, after ministers had defended the delays and explained how complex it was. New South Wales also charges \$25 and generally requires the same tenants to move together. If a claim is later made against the original bond, the government may pay the landlord and invoice the renter. Portable bonds do not make the liability disappear. The government has to recover the bond somehow and the money somehow. I do not know—debt collection from the government as a renter is a bit of a chilling thought, and it is something that we need to think seriously about what that would look like.

In some circumstances portable bonds change when the renter must find the money and transfer the immediate risk to government. A later claim may then become a debt owed by the renter to government. That is something we really need to think about: what that looks like and how it plays out. We do also need to consider how portability would interact with rental bond help—rental bond help providing eligible renters with an interest-free loan covering up to 100 per cent the bond repayable over up to two years. It seems like the other states excluding a similar service means the very people who need the most help are being excluded from this scheme. That assistance I am not suggesting resolves every instance of bond overlap, but any new scheme needs to work alongside it rather than simply being bolted on top of it.

Our Rental Bonds Portal was designed to lodge and release bonds, not to bridge bonds between properties or manage the resulting debts and financial exposure. Preliminary advice indicates the external vendor would be required and that the ICT work alone could cost more than \$1 million, depending on the model. New South Wales has invested \$6.6 million in developing its scheme. South Australia has provided \$7 million

over four years to establish its scheme. It is not something other jurisdictions have achieved by simply flicking a switch or responding to a motion simply and going, “Good idea. We’re on it.” Victoria’s scheme has operated for less than three months, New South Wales’ for a week. South Australia’s does not exist yet, but they are useful examples to examine. They are not a mature national model that the ACT can simply copy and paste—it is just not, and to pretend otherwise is disingenuous.

That brings me to the reporting period. The amendment, which I certainly welcome from Mr Cocks, proposes six months; the government is seeking nine. I think that is pretty modest. It is not about delaying the work. If we look closely, the Assembly is asking for an assessment of those several options. That assessment needs to include legislative requirements, policy settings, administration, ICT costs, risks, financial exposure, treatment of disputes and debts, interaction with existing programs and implementation pathways. That is very reasonable; I am very happy to accept that, but it is a substantial body of work for a small team whose members must also continue delivering existing services and priorities.

We do want this work delivered, but we do not want to crush the public service in the process. Indeed imposing an unrealistic deadline does not reduce the work; it just produces rushed consultation, unreliable costings, unresolved design questions or a report explaining that further work is still required—and no doubt an unhappy Assembly. Really, that would not serve renters, the Assembly or the public servants being asked to deliver it. Those additional three months are what we believe is our best effort—our best effort, best offer. The additional three months will allow the government to return with a credible implementation pathway during this parliamentary term.

The government is not dismissing affordable rental bonds. We are going to investigate them alongside other ways that may also achieve the same objective. We are agreeing to report back to the Assembly with an implementation pathway during this term, and we are seeking nine months to do the work so that we do have that reasonable opportunity to deliver it properly. The real test is not whether the scheme sounds simple in a media release. The real test is whether it works for Canberra renters, including those who are most likely to need our help. I commend my amendment and Mr Cocks’s amendment to the motion to the chamber.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (4.52): I support the amendment to this motion to investigate options to reduce the financial burden of bonds on our city’s renters. A rental bond is a large outlay, and renters moving to a new tenancy will need to pay a new bond weeks before they will receive a refund on their existing bond. A portable rental bond scheme will therefore provide much-needed financial relief at a stressful and expensive time for people renting. This relief will be particularly helpful to young people, those on lower incomes and people in vulnerable situations, and it will make it easier for people to move away from substandard and poorly maintained properties.

The ACT can learn from the experience of New South Wales and Victoria in implementing a scheme. We might not need a bespoke system. The ACT Revenue Office Rental Bonds Portal currently provides very limited functionality for tenants. This policy provides an opportunity to deliver a new or upgraded IT system to enable a portable rental bond scheme to provide a greater range of online functionality for

tenants, including requesting bond refunds. Minister Cheyne said someone has to manage the debt recovery arrangements. I think that is the least of the implementation and arrangement problems because the ACT Revenue Office is pretty good at debt recovery, and we discovered that in the inquiry into the home concession scheme.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (4.54): Regarding the amendment, I thank the minister for her productive engagement and Ms Vassarotti for her productive engagement as well. We have been withholding our decision as to whether we would support the extension of time, because we needed to hear a good case as to why the extra time was needed. I have to say that, in addition to Ms Cheyne's comments in the chamber just now, one of the things that actually sits with me is the comment that she made to me—if I can attempt to quote correctly—that it is a very tiny team. The Canberra Liberals acknowledge that the work to be done on this proposal is a new body of work. I would hope that the government has actually been looking at the issue for some time, but the last thing that we would want to do is crush our public servants—who work incredibly hard already—in an attempt to deliver something and see something which, as a result, could not be feasibly implemented.

The other thing that gives me some hope in this respect is Ms Cheyne's commitment to something which will have an implementation pathway for this term. This is not something that the government should be pushing off. People are in stress now and we need to see movement on this front.

With all of that taken into account, the Canberra Liberals will support the additional time.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education, Minister for Child Development and Wellbeing, Minister for Finance, Minister for the Public Service, and Minister for Health Infrastructure) (4.56): I will speak very briefly. We really appreciate the Canberra Liberals' support for Ms Cheyne's amendment. It is important for all the reasons she has outlined. I want to very briefly respond to Ms Carrick's comments in relation to the Revenue Office. There was her characterisation of the Revenue Office's compliance activity, and the imputation, from the way that she said, "They are very good at it," was that they should not be doing it.

Compliance activity in the Revenue Office is a very important activity, but it is not costless. The Revenue Office has provided advice, which Ms Cheyne has also taken on board, in relation to the resources that would be required for debt management, business intelligence and identity verification. If there were a portable scheme, it would be required at a significantly higher standard than what we require at the moment for rental bonds to ensure the integrity of the scheme.

There are staff in the Revenue Office who work very hard to protect the integrity of the ACT government's revenue, which is what funds our vital services. It is incumbent on everyone in this place to respect that work and understand that these are small teams that work hard on behalf of the ACT government. They do not always get everything right and we accept when we need to do better, but it is important work and it is work that requires resourcing. We resource that work and we have put additional resources into it, but this type of activity would require different processes and significantly more resources.

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (4.58): I would like to thank all members who have engaged with this motion. The Greens will support the amendments that the Canberra Liberals have brought forward. It is really heartening to see that they are on board with addressing the issue, and I wanted to thank Mr Cocks for sharing his experience in this debate.

I acknowledge that we do not necessarily agree with the amendment at 2(b). Where the Canberra Liberals may see taxation and regulatory burden, we seek the strongest protections for renters' rights in the country. The Greens will never be ashamed of standing up for renters in the face of landlords' and investors' interests.

The Greens are strongly of the view that the portable rental bond scheme is the best solution to the issue. As Mr Emerson noted, there are schemes operating that we can learn from. They are new; that is correct. And I really wanted to thank Mr Emerson for his contributions regarding some of the ways that we can deal with issues such as debts. We do see that the evidence is in, and we do not need to reinvent the wheel after New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia have all examined the issue quite recently and come up with the same solution.

And I would reflect, on the comments around needing an evidence base, that the core goal of this motion is to do the policy work that draws on the evidence and experience of other jurisdictions. And it is a bit disappointing to see the major parties team up to take the cause of delaying and complicating a fairly straightforward solution. It does, potentially, speak to some of the disconnect.

However, we are really happy to see the policy and implementation-thinking commence. We recognise that there is complexity, which is why the original motion asked the government to do the policy work, to address all of the issues that were rightly raised by the Attorney-General.

To the Attorney-General, in relation to some of her comments, what we were doing in government as ACT Greens is that we were working on a whole range of rental reforms. I will just point to one of them, no-cause evictions, that we were really pleased to bring to fruition last term. It is a bit disingenuous to say that we were not progressing on these issues when we were in government.

And I am really disappointed that the government amendments were tabled with no engagement with the lead-up to this debate. Despite the characterisation made by the Attorney-General, I have not actually had any discussion with you on this. I know you have been away, and engagement with the office has been pretty minimal in the lead-up to this motion. As she reflects, I hope this is not what we are to expect in the future.

Moving an amendment so that the government does not have to respond until after the budget, does not give me a great deal of confidence that there will be funding for the next budget, for this proposal.

As Mr Cocks notes in his comments, the pain renters are feeling is being felt now. It does create the potential of seeing no commitment, no delivery by this Labor government, even where other Labor governments can. That is disappointing.

As noted, I thank members for their engagement on this issue. To Ms Castley, asking what the tangible benefits are of this scheme: we are proposing a scheme that reduces the need for people to fork out two lots of bonds. The loan scheme is great. It provides support for people getting into a property. And as Miss Nuttall notes, asking people to take out loans for a second bond feels pretty ludicrous and unfair.

And I would also agree with the need to focus on increasing housing, as Mrs Morris notes. From an ACT Greens perspective, the focus must be on public housing.

I am particularly pleased to see the passing of this motion, even as amended, will see the start of work to examine how we can make a change that will make things significantly better for renters. We believe the idea of the affordable rental scheme stacks up, and we will continue to advocate to achieve this in the term of parliament. It is up to the government to show the community that they prioritise the needs of Canberrans doing it tough in this cost-of-living crisis. Let's get on with the work together.

Ms Cheyne's amendment to **Mr Cocks's** proposed amendment agreed to.

Mr Cocks's amendment, as amended, agreed to.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

Leave of absence

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

Mr Cocks moved—That leave of absence be granted to Ms Barry for this sitting due to personal reasons.

Appropriation Bill 2026-2027

[Cognate bill: Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2026-2027]

Detail stage

Health and Community Services Directorate—Part 1.6

Debate resumed.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (5.04): Well, it is a strange feature of government appropriation bills that means we structure this debate around bureaucratic structures of government directorates. There is no link to outcomes in the appropriation bill, or even outputs, just money appropriated for broad-ranging directorates. Now, for this line item, I think we are debating the Health and Community Services Directorate because there is no longer even a discrete community services directorate. So, everything, every activity across that incredibly broad range of that directorate gets discussed here.

And one of the important portfolios that sometimes is at risk of feeling homeless, and is at risk of completely disappearing in this discussion sometimes, is youth. And it is

important to talk about Canberra's youth, the people growing up here—not just children but young people, teenagers, young adults—the people who have to live with the consequences of today's decision, for the longest.

It is important to acknowledge it because, Mr Speaker, Labor has walked away from Canberra's young people. They have no coherent youth strategy. Existing youth-focused initiatives are being eroded. The previous whole-of-government commitment has expired with no evaluation and no replacement. Labor promised a youth strategy at the last election, but during estimates it was revealed that no work has been done since that time, to deliver it. And when pressed on the issue and, indeed, on the issues that matter to young people from across government, the minister effectively disowned responsibility.

This, at the same time as young Canberrans are trying to chart their own course through life in a world that is less stable, less predictable and changing more quickly than at any time in generations. They are dealing with housing becoming harder to afford. The cost of establishing an independent life keeps on rising. The world of work is changing before many of them have even entered it. Technology is reshaping jobs and industries. Mental health pressures are real; social isolation is real. The path from school to work to independence, to building a life of your own is increasingly difficult to navigate—not to mention expensive.

And on top of all of that—on top of all of it—this government is passing on the bill for years of bad decisions; years of bad decisions and bad management. Canberra's young people deserve better than that. They deserve a government with some ambition for their future, because Canberra's youth demonstrate that there is enormous cause for hope. Young people in Canberra are capable of extraordinary things, and they are adapting to a changing world faster than many of the institutions around them. They are learning differently, working differently, starting businesses differently and building communities differently.

Canberra's young people are leading the way. I know they will succeed, and many of them already are, but right now it feels like they are succeeding in spite of this government, and that has to change. We need a government that is ambitious for Canberra's youth and Canberra's future; a government that creates the conditions for success that allow young people growing up in Canberra to succeed here, to build their future here, to build their lives here, and to help create the Canberra of the future. Surely, we should want young Canberrans to see their future here, rather than simply following that same old road out of town. How about we have a little ambition for the young people already growing up here in Canberra?

Mr Speaker, that is the standard against which we have to look at this part of the budget. And the evidence from estimates was deeply concerning. Labor's Minister for Children, Youth and Families effectively disowned responsibility for youth policy during estimates. He confirmed that he has made no representations to advocate for a whole-of-government approach to youth issues. He has undertaken no evaluation of the previous youth policy, done no work on the government's promised ACT youth strategy, and believes responsibility for the issues that matter to young people rests with other ministers.

The minister's admissions expose a government that has no vision, no plan, and simply no leadership for young people. Frankly, it is about time that the government realised that just because you cannot vote yet, does not mean your opinion and your interests should be dismissed. And just because you are a young adult in Canberra does not mean your vote should be taken for granted. Labor appointed a minister responsible for youth, who will not even advocate for a whole-of-government youth policy perspective.

At some point, you have to ask, in that case: what exactly is the point of the minister for youth?

Because the ACT Children and Young People's Commitment expired at the end of 2025 without replacement. So, that has left Canberra with no overarching whole-of-government framework for young people. Now Mr Speaker, that is not to say that the previous commitment was of a great deal of value. Because the minister's comments in estimates really highlight the sort of concerns that were raised by the ACT Youth Advisory Council all the way back in 2023—that, in their words, the "ACT Children and Young People's Commitment 2015-2025 is ineffective in action, accountability, and implementation". And that, again in their words "the existing commitment publication is merely words, with disingenuous intent".

Mr Speaker, there needs to be a shift in attitude. But the minister's dismissal of the interests and needs of young people is both an abdication of responsibility and a concerning reflection of a government that treats youth affairs with posturing rather than substance.

During estimates, the minister was dismissive of the need for a youth strategy; dismissive of the views of young people expressed through the Youth Council; and from where I was sitting, dismissive of his role as a voice for young people to reach into and across government.

ACT Labor promised at the 2024 election to co-design an ACT youth strategy. It was a promise, and, like other promises that we have been discussing in this place, it is a promise that seems to have evaporated after the election. Because the minister did confirm no work on delivering the promise, and that exposed glaring holes in the way Labor approaches youth policy.

Instead, the minister sought to diminish the importance of that strategy; argued that other ministers were responsible. Now, yes, other ministers have a role in delivering the services that young depend on but to pass the buck to someone else is such as abdication of responsibility that you cannot let it stand—because there are no whole-of-government objectives anymore for young people, no clear outcomes, no visible accountability.

Now we know there is not even a minister prepared to fight for one, and it tells us something very important about the way the government sees youth affairs.

Because a young person's life does not fit neatly inside a government portfolio. It does not sit neatly inside a bureaucratic box. It is sort of the point. A young person finishing school might be thinking about further education, their first job, transport, somewhere to live, mental health, relationships, money, whether Canberra offers the kind of future

they want. But, for some young people, they might even be thinking about just how to get by day to day. And all of the different issues that impact young people—and there is a broad spectrum—shape whether that young person moves successfully towards independence.

(Second speaking period taken.)

Those things do interact. They shape whether that person successfully achieves independence. And somebody in government needs to see that whole picture. They need to see the whole person. They need to acknowledge that what is important during childhood is not the thing that is important to someone during their teenage years. It is not the same thing that a young adult needs as they move into life. And that is why you need to have a youth minister.

And there is another problem built into what I have just been talking about, because the distinct perspective of young people is increasingly being swallowed by the childhood perspective. The government routinely seems to talk about children and young people as though they are one policy category, but they are not. There is overlap but the perspectives of a child and the perspectives of a young person moving toward adulthood, and the perspective of a young adult are different. They need different things.

For a child, the dominant policy questions quite often are around protection, care, safety, early development, putting their feet on the right path so that they can succeed in life. But as you move through life, that changes. As you move through adolescence and into adulthood, questions increasingly include independence, agency, employment, privacy, mobility, housing, personal responsibility, the ability to make decisions for yourself to charge your own course through life.

Those perspectives can seem to come into tension. But the risk we face in government is when you wrap them all up together, as some of the youth advocates and groups that I speak to point out, you risk undermining the youth focus in favour of a purely child and family focus.

You see, a young person needs to the opportunity to find their feet; the opportunity to exercise their judgement, build confidence, take responsibility and become independent. And that spans issues in health, it matters in mental health, it matters in justice, it matters in education and training, in housing, in transport, it matters in employment, it matters in the way we design public spaces and communities. And it matters when you look at the cost of living and affordability in this city.

A 20-year-old trying to get a job, to find somewhere to live, to establish an adult life, has a very different relationship with government than a six-year-old. But as we look across programs it does look like the youth perspective is becoming increasingly difficult to identify in this government.

And that is why the minister's position during estimates was so revealing. We do have a minister for youth, and the purpose is to make sure the impact on young people and their future is built into everything. If every youth issue belonged somewhere else, who is responsible for asking what all of those government decisions add up to, for young

people?

Who is asking whether it is becoming easier or harder for a young Canberran to establish themselves here, to build their life here? Because that is what we want. We want Canberrans across their life to see a future in this city.

But who is looking at whether young people can access work? Who is looking at whether they can afford independence? Who is providing that cohesive view of whether Canberra is a place where young people want to stay? Who is arguing for them across government?

The answer should be “the minister for youth”.

Mr Speaker, the government had a warning that its previous approach was failing. The ACT Youth Advisory Council did say, as I pointed out, that that commitment from the government was merely words. A serious government would have treated that as a call to action. It would have urgently examined what was working and what had failed. It would have established clear objectives for the future. It would have built a whole-of-government youth strategy, without necessarily even having to wait for an election. It would have had measurable outcomes and clear responsibility. But they let the old framework expire, and the promised replacement is nowhere.

Mr Speaker, it is an absolute privilege to hold the youth portfolio, to be a voice for the amazing, creative, resilient and ambitious people growing up in Canberra. The minister responsible for youth appears unwilling to own the task.

Canberra's young people deserve a government with ambition for their future, not just a heavier burden from Labor's multi-generational interest bill. We should have ambition for their good education, and for real opportunities when they graduate; ambition so they can find that first job and build their experience. We should have ambition so they can access and build the skills that will help them to thrive in a fast-changing economy; ambition so they can start a business, create something, take a chance on an idea. We should have ambition so that Canberra's youth can see a pathway to financial independence; ambition for them to be able to afford somewhere to live. We should have ambition for them to grow up in a vibrant, safe and connected community.

Surely this place can have some ambition for Canberra to be a city where every young person who grows up here or comes here can see a future here, and build the future their way. Mr Speaker, we should not accept young people leaving Canberra because they feel like everyone else is the priority. There is nothing inevitable about independence moving further and further out of reach.

And Mr Speaker, young Canberrans will inherit the decisions being made in this budget. Young Canberrans are our future. But as things stand, they are looking at inheriting Labor's debt. They will inherit Labor's interest burden. Young Canberrans will inherit Labor's decaying infrastructure. They will inherit Labor's hollowed out services. Young Canberrans will inherit Labor's unaffordable housing market.

Canberra's youth deserve better. They deserve more than the burden of this government's mistakes. They deserve a government with ambition for their future.

They deserve a government prepared to listen to them, advocate for them and create the conditions in which they succeed. Canberra's young people are already showing us what they are capable of. It is time their government showed a little ambition too.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (5.21): I want to speak to a few of the items within this portfolio area, starting with the community service funding. I want to welcome the government's nearly \$60 million boost to the community sector in this budget, including the \$22.7 million funding uplift for community service providers over four years. This acknowledges the significant population growth in the territory, which has not been met with commensurate funding for the community sector for many years, and rising demand for assistance due to the housing, cost-of-living and fuel crises that continue to squeeze Canberrans.

This uplift also reflects the terms of my supply agreement with the government to correct years of chronic underfunding for community service providers and for their work. Too often we see announcements of temporary measures with a year or two of funding, which makes it impossible for community service providers to plan, recruit and retain staff and deliver longer term interventions. That is why it is positive to see the government announce a permanent and sustainable funding uplift in the budget. Of course there is more to do, and this is an area in which I will continue to advocate, but I think it is worth acknowledging those who have fought hard for the funding that has been received, including the incredible team at ACTCOSS led by Dr Devin Bowles.

In March a resolution was passed by the Assembly on community sector sustainability. One of the calls was for the government to make contract funding renewal decisions at least six months before expiry to give community service providers certainty and improve their sustainability. The government's response to this was that as a result of that feedback and as one action to help address this issue the 2026-27 budget was released two weeks earlier in June than the 2025-26 budget. This is not a meaningful response to address the unreasonable pressures put on community service organisations to plan and prepare for service delivery. I recall there was a lot of work done across the Assembly to agree to that earlier reporting date, but I do know the government knows there is more work to do in this area.

These organisations serve some of our most vulnerable community members, including women and children escaping violence, people experiencing homelessness and a growing cohort of Canberrans needing emergency food relief. Adequate funding and advanced contract renewal notice is necessary to ensure service providers' viability and to ensure that if they are supported appropriately to continue delivering those essential services, noting that this gap, if it were to widen, would otherwise have to be filled by the government anyway.

I want to touch on the \$5.2 million for a new and expanded rent relief fund, the Housing Crisis Support Fund. As members will recall, this fund was scrapped in the last budget. I welcome the government heeding the calls of our community and, again, a very strong campaign led by ACTCOSS and also the team at Care Financial, as well as members of this Assembly and the recommendation of the 2025-26 estimates committee. The new fund is expected to support more than 3,300 Canberrans through crisis support payments and rental subsidies. We have spoken about the importance of such support in the debate on Ms Vassarotti's motion this afternoon. Governments have I think a

moral obligation to ensure their citizens can meet their basic needs and that they have got access to sufficient food and secure housing. Until we see the systemic reform that is really needed to make that happen, to address the fact that we have got social, economic, political systems that are not meeting the basic needs of citizens, programs like this are required to help plug the gaps.

There is also funding here for domestic, family and sexual violence services—\$44.2 million in what has been called new funding with key investments, including \$18.5 million to provide stable, ongoing funding for core domestic, family and sexual violence response services, including Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre and YWCA Canberra. Frontline domestic, family and sexual violence services, though, say this funding is largely an extension of existing funding rather than a real increase. It just puts an end to some of the funding cliffs that were on their way, but not all of those funding cliffs, and this was something that came out and was teased out during the community day in our estimates hearings.

Fifty per cent of calls to the Domestic Violence Crisis Service crisis line are still going unanswered. There is still a massive, clear need for increased funding to actually meet the level of demand in this area. The Canberra Rape Crisis Centre said its funding is around 40 per cent below what is needed to meet demand for its services. It has also advocated for five-year funding cycles across all its contracts to give it certainty to provide its critical service to our community. This is an area where there is further work needed, and that was made absolutely clear during the estimates hearings.

On Oaks Estate, in the HCSD portfolio there is \$2.4 million provided to continue the Oaks Estate community inclusion program for the next four years, and this is welcome. Long-term certainty for this program is needed as it was not a given when the *Oaks Estate Strategic Plan* was announced almost a year ago. In May of last year I co-sponsored a motion with Ms Lee and Mr Rattenbury which committed the ACT government to developing a five-year strategic plan for Oaks Estate. That motion and that plan followed many years of advocacy from the Oaks Estate Residents Association for more support from the ACT government for what is absolutely one of the most neglected and vulnerable communities here in the ACT.

Their advocacy is ongoing, and during estimates we discovered that one letterbox drop appeared to be used to tick off six actions in the strategic plan—six out of 37 actions with one letterbox drop is a pretty good strike rate. In response to this, the Oaks Estate Residents Association president Fiona MacGregor said, “What we wanted was community safety, public footpaths, a plan for public transport and long-term answers on what’s going to happen with the public housing.” There is absolutely a lot more work to do in this area. I did want to acknowledge during hearings the head of the directorate acknowledging that and that that was not a one-and-done letterbox drop and that more work will be needed not just to meet those six actions but the remaining actions.

I did stand with Kurrajong colleagues Ms Lee and Ms Vassarotti and appreciated doing so in calling for the government to really step up in this area. This is one of those plan—I have been touching on this more and more in this place—that is there but needs to be delivered, and it cannot just remain words on a page. We need to make sure this is followed up with tangible actions. What I think is sad in many ways about what the Oaks Estate community is calling for is that the calls are so simple. They are calling for

footpaths on their streets. They have only got a few streets. They are calling to fix up the handrail around the scenic walk there—just a bit of access to public transport, a bit of access to the rest of the community here in the ACT and a plan for public housing. They have the highest density of public housing in the ACT. These are simple calls, and things like giving them access to their community hall is something that they have not been able to get actioned.

In this portfolio area it is critical—we often speak about it in this area—that we are supporting Canberra’s most vulnerable community members, something that is repeatedly spoken about in this place. We celebrate being the most progressive jurisdiction in the country. The reality, though, remains that this is an incredibly tough place to be doing it tough. This is an area where I am keen to continue engaging with the government and reflecting community advocacy to ensure that investment is provided at a sufficient and sustainable level to actually address the level of need we are seeing across our community for support from the ACT government.

MRS MORRIS (Brindabella) (5.30): I rise to make a statement on behalf of Ms Chiaka Barry in her capacity as the Shadow Minister for the Prevention Of Family and Domestic Violence, Shadow Minister for Social Housing and Homelessness and Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs. This is Ms Barry’s statement:

Turning first to the government’s appropriations in relation to the territory’s domestic and family violence response. Mr Speaker, when I took over the shadow portfolio earlier this year, I was taken aback by the systemic issues plaguing our domestic and family violence sector. From my very first meetings with our community frontline services, it was obvious that the government is leaning incredibly heavily on those services, relying on the fact that these services will find a way to stretch their already strained resources further, that they will continue to come up with creative, temporary solutions to systemic issues at their own expense, that they will again, and again, and again push the limits of their capacity to step up and fill the gaps that the government will not.

Mr Speaker, I have only held the shadow portfolio for a few short months, but it is already clear that the strain on our community frontline services is significant. We know that staff are stretched so thin that they are struggling to answer phone calls from victim-survivors. And I know that our services are reluctant to speak too loudly about that because they do not want to dissuade victims from calling through to them, aware that some victim-survivors will discount the severity of their own situations so that others who are trying to get help can, taking their place.

I have heard stories from victim-survivors who have submitted the most basic maintenance requests on their public housing properties. We are talking about requests as simple, as essential as a lock change or a simple fence repair, who end up waiting weeks for those requests to be actioned. And all of that is before we even begin to talk about the pressures hit on community frontline services when they are left to house victim-survivors who have escaped their existing home but are left to wait months, sometimes over a year, to be housed in a public housing property.

And where is a victim-survivor left to turn when there are over 3,600 people on the public housing waitlist? And what are community frontline services left to do when victim-survivors come knocking and, despite being beyond capacity, are putting them up in hotels for weeks on end at their own expense, knowing that if

they do not act, the government will not, and these victim-survivors will fall through the cracks.

Mr Speaker, I have had shadowed ministerial responsibility for this portfolio for only a short few months, and in that time, these are only some of the issues that I have been alerted to. Each of these examples tell the story of a stressed community frontline service that the government continues to take for granted. We heard on day one of the Estimates Committee hearings from a panel of domestic and family violence services who said, “I think that all of us here would be servicing only a very small proportion of the people that come to us for assistance.”

It does not need to be said that the government’s spending on domestic and home violence demands particularly close scrutiny, precisely because of what we are hearing from our frontline services, that there is a large cohort of underserved victim-survivors in the ACT who are at risk of falling through the cracks. For every dollar spent and minute used ineffectually, we rob our frontline services and victim-survivors of resources that would support them in the places that they need it most. We are a small jurisdiction. We should be nimble enough to respond, to identify and respond to the key issues facing the system in a way that is coordinated and avoids siloed service responses.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I would like to comment on some of the chief concerns I hold after reviewing this year’s budget. My chief concern in relation to the funding earmarked for the delivery of the government’s first action plan on domestic, family and sexual violence is that the plan was created before updated system mapping work has been completed. Having a comprehensive whole-of-sector picture of the barriers to access, resourcing stresses and pressure points for frontline services is fundamental to ensuring that the government’s longer-term strategy on domestic and family violence, and the funding accompanying it, is actually being directed to the pinpoints that will make a tangible difference to those interacting with the system.

Secondly, the government’s reporting on domestic and family violence funding needs improving. Specifically, we need more detailed reporting on funding that is being directed to government staffed initiatives that are not frontline services. We cannot examine the effectiveness of non-frontline government-staffed programs effectively if only the government knows the detail of what that funding is actually being used for.

I appreciate having received an answer to my question on notice on this point, but I feel it essential that the government transparently report on its own record in this space via the public budget documents so that we do not have to jump through these hoops to find out how much domestic violence funding is going to non-frontline government department staffing. And Mr Speaker, I will reserve my comments on public housing for later in the debate when we debate the government’s appropriations to Housing ACT.

But finally, Mr Speaker, on multiculturalism, we need a better picture of what the government is actually doing in this space beyond administering multicultural community event grants. I asked what was being done about reported racism in our schools, but that is an issue that has been raised with me repeatedly, and the response I received is that it was a question for the Education Directorate. Championing our multicultural communities in the ACT has to be more than a tick-box exercise. I am unfortunately not confident on scrutinising this budget, that this is even a remote priority for the government.

To conclude, Canberra, you deserve so much better than what the government has served up to you in in this budget. The figures, projections and frail promises tell the same worn-out story of a government that has, over the last 24 years, grown completely comfortable taking the people of Canberra for granted. Canberra, you deserve a government that works hard for you. You deserve a government that strives, that genuinely strives, day after day, to earn your confidence and keep your trust. You deserve a government that has not forgot that they exist to serve you. Canberra, you deserve so much better than this.

That concludes the remarks from Ms Barry.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate—Part 1.7

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Trade, Investment and the Knowledge Economy, Minister for Tourism and Events, and Minister for Major Projects) (5.39): I will cover trade, investment, knowledge economy, tourism and major events, as these are all within this portfolio. As I have been discussing this week, there is no doubt that Canberra's future prosperity is built on knowledge. Our competitive advantage is not scale; it is talent, it is education, it is research, it is innovation and it is ideas. We are, of course, home to world-class universities, leading research institutions, a growing innovation ecosystem and one of the most highly educated populations in the world. This budget builds on those strengths through a focused international engagement agenda centred on the European Union, the United Kingdom, India and ASEAN.

The heart of this agenda is education. As we have discussed many times today, international education is Canberra's most important export, but its value extends far beyond tuition fees. Every student who chooses Canberra contributes to our universities, supports local businesses and strengthens our research capability. They go on to become researchers, entrepreneurs, investors and highly skilled workers in our city. They build lifelong connections with Canberra and help extend our influence across the world.

Education is therefore not simply a sector of the economy, it is a foundation of the knowledge economy. The knowledge economy creates a virtuous cycle. International students strengthen our universities. Strong universities attract research funding, talent and global partnerships. Research drives innovation and commercialisation. Innovation attracts investment and supports new businesses. Investment creates jobs and opportunities. Those opportunities attract more talent, more students and more investment. Each element reinforces the next. International connectivity is therefore essential to sustain that cycle.

For Canberra aviation is economic infrastructure. It connects students to our universities, researchers to our global partners, businesses to markets, investors to opportunities and visitors to our cities. That is why restoring direct Singapore-Canberra services remains one of our most important economic development priorities in the near term. Singapore is not simply another destination, it is a gateway linking Canberra to Europe, the United Kingdom, India and South-East Asia. Direct connectivity would

improve access to our priority markets, support international education, increase visitor expenditure, strengthen business travel and enhance Canberra's attractiveness as a destination for investment. Importantly, getting this route back depends on demand from multiple markets. Students from India and ASEAN, visitors from Europe and the United Kingdom, conference delegates, researchers, business travellers and investors all contribute to the passenger volumes needed to sustain a direct service. As these markets grow, the case for direct connectivity strengthens. As connectivity improves, Canberra becomes more attractive to those very same markets. That is why our education, tourism, aviation and trade strategies must operate together.

Our investment priorities are equally clear. We will focus on sectors where Canberra already has globally recognised strengths and genuine comparative advantage. We will seek investment in clean technology and climate innovation, building on Canberra's leadership in sustainability and net zero policy. We will seek to attract investment into cyber security, digital government and gov tech, areas where Canberra possesses a unique concentration of expertise. We will support growth in defence technologies, space industries, advanced health technologies and research commercialisation, translating ideas developed in our institutions into businesses, exports and employment. We will seek to continue to position Canberra as the best location in Australia for knowledge-intensive investment, where government, research, industry and talent operate side by side.

Ultimately this entire agenda is about jobs. Every additional student supports employment, education, accommodation, hospitality and retail. Every additional visitor supports tourism, aviation events and local business. Every research partnership creates new opportunities for commercialisation and innovation. Every investment project creates demand for skilled workers and local suppliers. Every improvement in international connectivity strengthens the overall conditions for future economic growth.

This budget seeks to back Canberra's greatest strengths. It invests in education, research, innovation and global connections. It supports the growth of high-value industries. It seeks to attract talent and investment, and it strengthens international engagement. Most importantly, it creates the conditions for more secure, highly skilled and well-paid jobs for Canberrans. That is how we continue building Australia's knowledge capital.

Canberra's visitor economy is also a very important part of our economic future. Tourism and events support jobs in accommodation, hospitality, retail, transport and professional services. They bring people to our city, create opportunities for local businesses and strengthen our city's national and international profile. The tourism sector has strong momentum. In the year ending March 2026 the ACT welcomed 4.6 million visitors, an increase of 4 per cent. Visitor expenditure reached \$3.3 billion, up 12 per cent, and visitors spent 12.2 million nights in Canberra, an increase of 9 per cent. International visitation increased by 11 per cent to 191,000 visitors. International visitor expenditure reached \$629 million, an increase of 22 per cent.

The government's ambition is to grow Canberra's visitor economy by up to \$1 billion further by 2030. This budget supports that ambition through approximately \$72 million in funding over four years for tourism, major events, destination marketing, venues and

major infrastructure. At the centre of this work is the *T2030 ACT Tourism Strategy*. The budget invests \$7.1 million over three years, including \$3.1 million in this current fiscal year, to attract more visitors, increase visitor expenditure, develop the tourism industry and secure more major events. This includes expanding the Major Event Fund to build a stronger and more consistent year-round events calendar. We do this because major events fill hotel rooms, restaurants and cafes. They support retailers, transport providers, suppliers and local workers. They showcase Canberra and give visitors more reasons to come here, to stay longer and then to return.

To compete for more events we need the infrastructure to host them, and that is why a central element of the government's long-term economic strategy is the new National Convention and Entertainment Centre. The government is progressing the project to a construction-ready stage in partnership with the Australian government through the National Capital Investment Framework. The current budget program provides \$13.667 million in capital funding. After commonwealth contributions, the net ACT capital investment is \$3.823 million over the forward estimates. This work will deliver the reference design, business case and procurement plan, alongside planning approvals, technical investigation, stakeholder engagement, economic appraisal and assessment of the preferred delivery model. This is the detailed work required to produce a credible and investment-ready project.

The proposed centre will combine flexible convention and exhibition facilities. It includes an entertainment arena, seating around 7,500 people. Current planning envisages approximately 8,000 square metres of exhibition space expandable to 10,000 square metres using the arena floor. It also includes a 3,000 seat plenary that can be divided to host concurrent events. That flexibility is critical. This will not be a facility used for a few dozen major events each year. Convention facilities will host conferences, exhibitions, meetings and trade events throughout the working week. The arena will host concerts, indoor sport and major entertainment at night and on weekends. The design will allow for different parts of the centre to operate concurrently. A conference could be underway during the day while the arena is being prepared for a concert or a sporting event that evening.

Some question in the need for this facility. The need for that capacity is abundantly clear. The existing National Convention Centre has reached its operating capacity. It cannot materially increase the size of events or the number of major events it hosts. It is fully booked out all of the time. This means Canberra is missing opportunities because the present facility does not offer the scale and the flexibility the market requires. A larger and more flexible facility will allow us to compete for more national and international conferences that we simply cannot currently accommodate.

Our city has a major advantage in this market. We are, of course, home to the Australian Parliament, the diplomatic community, leading universities and research institutions and considerable national and international expertise across defence, cybersecurity, public policy, health, education and science, to name but a few areas. A modern convention centre will allow us to translate those strengths into more conferences, more delegates and, importantly, more expenditure in the economy. Business events are particularly valuable because they drive weekday and off-peak demand. Delegates use hotels, restaurants, transport, technical services and event suppliers. Many extend their visit or return later with family and friends.

The entertainment arena addresses a different but equally significant gap. A venue of at least 7,500 indoor will enable Canberra to host concerts, indoor sporting fixtures and major events that currently bypass the city because the AIS Arena is too small. It will bring thousands of people into Civic at night and on weekends, supporting nearby hotels, restaurants, retailers and the night-time economy. This new centre is complemented by the 2000-seat lyric theatre that is under construction right now and planned to open in 2028. The budget provides a little over \$13 million in capital funding, together with operational support for market readiness, programming, business systems, safety and emergency planning. Demand for the lyric theatre is not hypothetical. In 24-25 the Canberra Theatre Centre welcomed more than 272,000 patrons and delivered 570 performances across 181 events and 51 works. This is an average of more than one-and-a-half performances every day across the centre's three existing smaller venues. One production alone, the *Chicago* musical, attracted more than 30,000 people across 28 performances. So the lyric theatre builds on that demonstrated demand. It will allow Canberra to host major musicals, theatrical productions and large-scale performances that, again, bypass the city because our existing stages, seating capacity and technical facilities are too limited.

The key point in all of this is how these facilities will work together. The convention centre will generate weekday and daytime activity. The lyric theatre will bring audiences into the city for evening performances and weekend matinees. The new arena will host concerts, indoor sport and major events, particularly at night and on weekends. They serve different markets at different times. They are complementary venues, not three facilities competing for the same events. Based on the strong utilisation of our current smaller venues and the ability of the new precinct to host concurrent events, we expect these facilities to support activity in the city on almost every single day and almost every single night of the year—hundreds and hundreds of events, not dozens. There will be days when a national conference is underway, a major musical is playing at the lyric theatre, when thousands of people are arriving for a concert or sporting event at the new entertainment centre that evening. That means delegates in Civic during the working week, theatre audiences in the evening and major crowds at night and on weekends. It means more consistent demand for hotels, restaurants, public transport, retailers and local suppliers. It means an active city centre from morning until late throughout the week and across the entire year. The economic logic of these investments is clear.

The budget also invests in events that I think we all agree define our city. We are providing \$645,000 for a two-year Floriade pilot from 2027, coinciding with the event's 40th anniversary. Floriade will open a day earlier, and it will operate for longer hours during the daylight saving period. The intent is to give visitors more time to experience the event and more reasons to stay overnight.

We are also investing around \$1.77 million over two years through our partnership with Cricket Australia to host men's and women's international cricket at Manuka Oval. International cricket has proven to attract interstate visitors and international visitors, generates national and international broadcast exposure and strengthens Manuka Oval's reputation as a major sporting destination.

All of these initiatives form a clear economic development strategy. We seek to build

demand through destination marketing. We secure events through our major events fund. We are extending our successful events such as Floriade, and we are bringing more international sport to Canberra. We are progressing the infrastructure that will allow our city to compete for opportunities that are currently beyond our reach because of the limitations of existing facilities. The National Convention and Entertainment Centre and the lyric theatre are city-shaping projects. Together they will support weekday, evening and weekend activity. They will attract visitors throughout the year and create more opportunities for our growing tourism, hospitality and retail sectors—benefits that extend across the wider economy.

Our objective is not simply to count more visitors, it is to increase the value of the visitor economy, to encourage longer stays, to support local jobs and to give more people a reason to choose Canberra. This budget invests in our city as a confident, connected and competitive national capital, and I commend this part of the budget to the Assembly.

MR MILLIGAN (Yerrabi) (5.56): I rise today to add my voice to that of those across Canberra—Canberra’s business, skills, sport and arts communities—who have every right to feel disappointed about this year’s budget. This is a budget that asks Canberrans to pay more to cover the costs of Labor’s mistakes. It asks households and businesses to shoulder a greater burden, while too often delivering less in return. Across each of my portfolios, we see the same pattern—higher costs, broken promises and a government that is increasingly unable to deliver.

Let me start with business. The Pegasus Economics report on the budget stated, “The ACT budget is increasingly reliant on payroll taxes.” Payroll tax is forecast to become an increasingly important source of government revenue, yet what do Canberra businesses have to show for the additional burden being placed on them? At the same time, government is demanding more from businesses. It has slashed funding for business communications and engagement nearly in half. When we ask why important initiatives in the Small Business Strategy, such as the digital business account, have not been delivered, the government’s answer is that they simply were not prioritised in the budget.

That says everything about this government’s approach to business. A strong small- to medium-sized business sector should be at the heart of repairing the territory’s finances. We need businesses investing, employing Canberrans, creating opportunities and growing our economy. Instead, this government seems more interested in ideology than practical solutions to make Canberra a better place to do business.

Unfortunately, that pattern continues when we turn to skills. Last year, the minister proudly trumpeted the government’s \$79 million investment in skills. But if we look at this year’s budget, a very different picture emerges. Of that \$79 million, only \$37 million was actually being spent on skills delivery. At the same time, the CIT CEO saga has left the territory’s largest provider of vocational education and training without a permanent CEO. At a time when Canberra employers are crying out for skilled workers, we need a vocational education system that is focused on apprentices, trainees and employers, and delivering the skills that our economy actually needs. Instead, we have uncertainty at CIT and questions about whether the government is delivering the investment that it so proudly announced.

The story is no better when we turn to sport. We often talk about the ACT having one of the highest rates of sport and recreational participation in the country. Canberra is an active city, and an active city needs spaces in which to move. In the lead-up to this budget, the community made its priorities clear. Sporting clubs and organisations called for better maintenance of our existing facilities and a long-term plan to deliver the sporting infrastructure that Canberra needs, in order to grow. Instead, Labor chose to delay its promised sporting facilities in Casey and Throsby. The minister will tell us that these projects have merely been “delayed”, but Canberrans have heard that word before. Under this government, a delayed project has an unfortunate habit of becoming a dead project. Just ask the people of Tuggeranong, who spent a decade being told that they would get an ice rink. How many more communities are expected to wait, year after year, for infrastructure that they were promised?

Finally, we need to talk about the arts. Canberra should be a city where creativity and innovation can flourish. But to achieve that, we need an arts community that gives local performers, musicians and artists somewhere to start. I have spoken with many people across the arts community who are crying out for more local performance spaces, particularly the medium-sized venues. These venues matter. They are where emerging artists find an audience. They are where undiscovered talent gets its first opportunity. They are where a genuinely local and organic arts culture can develop.

These four areas may seem different—business, skills, sport and the arts—but the underlying problem is the same. It is about trust. The budget abuses the trust of the people of Canberra. Canberrans expect that when they pay their taxes, that money will be used to deliver the services and infrastructure that the community need. They expect that when a government makes a promise, it will honour it and it will deliver it. And they expect that when a government announces funding, that funding will actually be delivered.

This budget fails those two tests. It asks Canberrans to pay more, while receiving less. It delays projects that communities were promised. It fails to deliver initiatives that government itself said were important. And, once again, it asks the Assembly to believe that a surplus is just around the corner.

This budget, almost single-handedly, has made a case for a charter of budget honesty. When we vote on this appropriation bill, we are not voting on behalf of the government. We are voting on behalf of the people who have sent us here. The government is asking us to support a budget that breaks promises, that asks Canberrans to pay more for less, and that once again promises a return to surplus, despite serious questions about whether it will be achieved. The people of Canberra deserve a budget that respects ratepayers’ money, keeps its promises and delivers work, to build trust in the community. They deserve a better budget than this.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Werner-Gibbings**) adjourned to a later hour.

Sitting suspended from 6.04 to 7.30 pm.

Appropriation Bill 2026-2027

[Cognate bill: Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2026-2027]

Detail stage

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate—Part 1.7

Debate resumed.

MS LEE (Kurrajong) (7.30): I rise to speak on the Appropriation Bill 2026-2027 as it relates to the tourism and major events portfolio. Tourism is a critical part of the ACT economy. It supports thousands of local jobs, drives activity for our hospitality and retail sectors, and helps to showcase our city as the nation's capital. But for Canberra to remain a destination of choice, we must be willing to listen to what businesses, visitors and industry leaders are telling us.

During the community day estimates hearing, we heard concerning evidence from David Marshall, Chair of the Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum, about the current state of Civic and the impact that ongoing light rail construction is having on local businesses. Dr Marshall said:

It is heartbreaking. It is absolutely heartbreaking to see businesses who have spent a lifetime working their butt off and then, through no fault of their own, are faced with financial ruin, in some cases.

He went on to say:

A number of restaurants have closed, and they had to close. The traffic in Civic at the moment is down about 15 per cent ... and that is serious. One of the pubs in Civic is down 30 per cent in turnover, and up 30 per cent in costs. It is just not sustainable. This will go on for another 12 to 18 months, at least. It is a serious worry.

These are not the comments of a political opponent; these are the observations of a respected tourism industry leader speaking on behalf of businesses that are struggling to keep their doors open. While major infrastructure projects inevitably cause disruption, governments also have a responsibility to mitigate that disruption and ensure that businesses are not left to shoulder the burden alone.

Dr Marshall also raised concerns about the impression that our city is leaving on visitors. Referring to experiences of families attending the Kanga Cup, he said:

Certainly, evidence from the Kanga Cup last year was that families were coming into Civic, they were seeing some of the antisocial behaviour, and homelessness. They got frightened; their kids were not comfortable.

Further, he stated:

Generally, it is the look. When you walk into the city centre and you see heavily graffitied buildings—there is one just across the road here—it is not a good look for the nation's capital.

These comments should concern every member in this chamber. We are the nation's

capital, and we should be top of the list of any visitor, whether from around Australia or around the world. First impressions matter. Visitors should arrive in our city and see a vibrant, welcoming and safe capital. They should not be left questioning whether the city centre is being properly maintained or whether it feels safe for families to visit; yet, once again, we have seen this government too readily dismiss these concerns.

Another issue that has been repeatedly raised with me by both Canberrans and visitors is the condition of the Jolimont Centre. Concerns include poor lighting, inadequate parking, safety concerns arising from increased antisocial behaviour in the area, and the overall condition and presentation of the facility. We all understand that the Jolimont Centre is privately owned, but that cannot become an excuse for inaction. With more than 20 coach services arriving from Sydney international airport on some days, the Jolimont Centre provides the first impression of Canberra for many interstate and international visitors. It is, effectively, one of the city's front doors.

When visitors arrive in the nation's capital, they should be greeted by a facility that reflects the status of our city—our capital city. Instead, many are left with an impression that the gateway to Canberra is run-down, unsafe and hard to access. I was disappointed that the Chief Minister did not appear to share these concerns when I raised them during the estimates hearings.

Unfortunately, the challenges facing tourism do not end there. We have also seen the announcement that Fiji Airways will cease direct services to Canberra next year. International aviation connections are extremely important. Every route that disappears weakens Canberra's connectivity to international markets, especially in light of a lot of the debates that Mr Barr has been involved in this week, in talking about the importance of some of those international markets, and it makes it harder to grow our visitor economy. At the same time, tourism operators continue to raise concerns about the need for stronger destination marketing, and the importance of ensuring that our city remains attractive, accessible and welcoming.

Canberra has extraordinary strengths. We have world-class national institutions, outstanding cultural attractions, major sporting and community events, beautiful natural landscapes, and a thriving food and wine sector, but we cannot take those strengths for granted. Canberra competes with destinations across Australia for visitors, conferences, sporting events and major exhibitions. We are the home of some of the most important national institutions, with venues like the Australian War Memorial consistently rated as the top tourist destination in the country.

Whilst these institutions have the backing of the commonwealth government and are a main drawcard for many visitors, we have seen years and years—decades and decades—of neglect and broken promises when it comes to the stadium and the convention centre. This ACT Labor government has been put on notice for decades that we continue to miss out on events and exhibitions that will bring more visitors, more investment, and a well-needed boost to the local economy.

The years and decades of inaction and lack of leadership on major venues like the stadium and the convention centre have become the butt of many jokes by media, with many sports journalists lamenting that, if the money that had been spent on countless, seemingly meaningless feasibility studies had been spent on commencing construction

on either of these projects, we would be enjoying World Cup games in a new stadium, or hosting important international meetings in a new convention centre, by now. Alas, it seems that the next generation of Canberrans will continue wondering when.

We are currently enjoying the best flower festival in the country, with Floriade just across the bridge, and the weather has really helped to make the opening weekend a stunning success. Of course, when we have major events like Summernats or the Kanga Cup, local businesses rely on visitors enjoying the local restaurants, bars, clubs and hotels.

Tourism success is not simply about events. It is also about the visitor experience, from the moment someone books their trip, to the moment they arrive, move around the city, spend time in our hospitality venues, and return home. If businesses in Civic are struggling, if visitors are expressing concerns about safety, if key transport gateways are deteriorating, and if our international connections are disappearing, that leaves a lasting impression on every visitor.

The tourism industry have raised these concerns in good faith. They deserve more than excuses and deflections. They deserve a government that is prepared to acknowledge the challenges and work constructively with them to address them.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (7.37): I am not going to lie; the speech that I am delivering in this line is a broad speech, and it will certainly mean that I will not be joining Mr Cocks in closing the debate. That is partly because, Mr Speaker, when you are as old as you and I, you do not know what shape you are going to be in, at whatever time it is that we are done today.

Turning to the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, this is, ultimately, where the big question about this budget sits: what sort of Canberra are we building and, after more than two decades of an ACT Labor government, are Canberrans actually better off?

It is not a rhetorical question. It is a question that every government that has been in office for some time should be prepared to answer, and Canberrans should be able to see the benefits of economic growth in their daily lives. They should be able to afford to live here. Businesses should be able to employ and invest. Infrastructure should be delivered. Public services should work, and the next generation should have more opportunities than the generation before them.

I am not sure that that is the case, because economic prosperity is not a line in a budget paper; it is about whether people can afford to live here, whether businesses can afford to operate here, whether people can get a job, whether they can start a business and keep it going for more than 12 months, whether they can buy a home, and whether they believe that Canberra is a place that is worth investing in.

The real measure is whether Canberrans are getting ahead, and that brings me to the cost of doing business. Every cafe owner, tradie, retailer and manufacturer in Canberra knows that the cost of operating a business has increased. They are dealing with wages, energy, insurance, rent, rates, compliance and government charges. My understanding is that there will be an announcement tomorrow regarding closure of a business that has

been operating in this town for 60 years, which is very sad.

Government needs to understand something very simple: businesses are not just taxpayers. They are employers and investors. They are landlords and tenants. They sponsor local sporting clubs and support community organisations. They create the activity that makes our town centres work. When government makes it harder to employ, invest or expand, there are consequences. The ACT government says it wants to support a growing private sector. We should make Canberra a place where businesses want to grow. We should be asking what government can get out of the way of, not what else it can regulate.

That is the difference in philosophy between us and them. They see business as another source of revenue; we see business as an economic partner. This is not an argument for government to do nothing. This government has an important role in creating the conditions for investment. But there is a difference between creating the conditions for prosperity and trying to manage every part of the economy—micromanage every part of the economy—from a government office. We need a government that understands its role.

Government should provide good infrastructure. It should provide reliable services. It should provide certainty. It should regulate where regulation is necessary and get out of the way where it is not. It should make sure that, when it spends taxpayers' money, it is getting value for money, because the private sector cannot carry the entire burden of economic growth while government continues to increase the cost of doing business.

That is why I am also concerned about the way that this government approaches infrastructure. The budget acknowledges that the infrastructure program has had to be adjusted to make it more sustainable and deliverable. The five-year infrastructure program is now forecast at \$7.5 billion, including \$5.05 billion in general government sector investment. Infrastructure matters enormously to economic prosperity, but infrastructure announcements are not the same thing as infrastructure delivery. A promise does not create a road. A provision in the forward estimates does not build a hospital. An announcement does not create a tram line. A project that is repeatedly delayed does not give businesses the certainty they need to invest and thrive. Canberra needs an infrastructure program that is affordable, properly costed and actually deliverable, and that is what a Parton Liberal government will deliver.

We also need to talk about productivity. For too long, the answer to every problem from this government has been another program, another strategy, another review, another task force or another increase in public expenditure. But there comes a point where the government has to ask whether it can deliver improved outcomes with the resources that it already has.

The ACT government has now recognised the need to limit the use of external contractors and has introduced a fiscal rule linking future growth in the ACT public service to population growth. For years, we have been told that more spending is necessary, more staff are necessary and more programs are necessary, yet the pressure on services remains, and the answer cannot always be “more”. It is, surely, about genuine reform, and that is the challenge facing the government. It is the challenge facing the next Chief Minister of the ACT.

The next government will have to repair finances, while continuing to deliver essential services. The next government cannot make promises that it cannot keep. It will have to make Canberra more affordable and more attractive to business. It will have to restore confidence in our public services. The findings of Operation Kingfisher are a dark shadow that the current government will carry all the way through to October 2028. It will have to convince people that government is working for them, rather than simply asking them to pay more for it.

I have spent a lot of this debate talking about the pressures facing individual Canberrans—health, housing, cost of living, public safety, business, a public education system in chaos. Let there be no doubt that these things are connected. If housing is unaffordable, people struggle to attract workers. If businesses cannot afford to employ, opportunities disappear. If public transport is unreliable, people lose time and businesses lose productivity.

After more than 20 years of Labor government, Canberra should be further ahead. We should have a city that leads the nation and region in health, education and infrastructure, a city that attracts investment, enhances opportunities for prosperity and delivers world-class services, a city where young Canberrans can look at this city and see a future for them. That is the Canberra that I want to lead—a Canberra that is ambitious but responsible, one that welcomes businesses rather than burdens them, a Canberra that rewards enterprise and protects the vulnerable, without trapping people in disadvantage. I am excited and optimistic about Canberra's future. The Canberra Liberals have a plan to rebuild the ACT, and we will share that with the people of this city in due course.

After more than two decades, the question is not whether Labor have had enough time, because they have. The question is: what have they done with that time? The evidence before us is a city facing higher costs, higher debt, pressure on essential services, an increasingly difficult environment for business, and a government that is still struggling to deliver on many of the commitments it makes.

Canberra can do better. The Canberra Liberals will provide that alternative. We will build an economy where people can invest, employ and grow. We will pursue responsible financial management, reduce unnecessary barriers to business and focus government on the things that it needs to do well. We will make sure that economic growth translates into something that matters much more than a number in a budget paper—a better life for the people who call Canberra home.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (7.45): I rise to speak to the CMTEDD appropriation for 2026-27. While it is nice to have another theatre—the fourth one in a row—a new convention centre and a new entertainment centre, there needs to be a balance with the social infrastructure our residents need in the districts. While tourists are important, are they more important than our local residents and their quality of life? The ACT government's Strategic Economic Development Framework, called CBR2030, paints an attractive picture of connected town centres, local jobs, vibrant communities and economic growth across Canberra. But, for communities in Woden, Weston Creek, Molonglo, the inner south and Tuggeranong, the key question is simple: how will this vision be achieved without the recreation, cultural and community infrastructure that

makes great places work?

Economic development is not just about homes and retail. If we want people to work, spend time and invest locally, we need places where people want to be. We need sporting facilities, arts spaces, community venues, events and public gathering places that support community life and create activity throughout the day and evening. Investment in grassroots arts and recreation is not simply a social policy; it is an economic development policy. These facilities attract visitors, support local businesses, generate activity in town centres and help build resilient, connected communities. They provide opportunities for people to participate in community life, develop local networks and create the sense of place and belonging that successful town centres depend on. Yet when we look at the government's plans, there are still major gaps. Where is the recreation plan for Woden? Where is the cultural infrastructure plan for Molonglo? Where is the community development strategy for Weston Creek or the inner south? How can we talk about activating town centres when there is no clear roadmap for the facilities and services that bring people together?

The questions are particularly relevant when we consider arts funding. My question taken on notice in the 2024-25 estimates revealed that 13 of the 82 successful Arts Activities grants in 2024-25, approximately 16 per cent were awarded to applicants living in Woden, Weston Creek and Molonglo. That sounds great. But where did those activities actually occur? The government's own answer shows that none took place in our town centres or groups centres and over 90 per cent were delivered outside the electorate. Activities were undertaken at the Canberra Theatre Centre, the Ainslie Arts Centre, various regional locations, interstate and overseas. None were linked with publicly identified local commercial venues. That highlights an important issue. Supporting artists who live in Murrumbidgee is positive, but what communities want to know is how much arts funding is creating activity and activation in the Murrumbidgee electorate? How many performances, exhibitions, workshops and cultural events are happening in our town centres? Where is the ongoing activation that supports local businesses and builds community life?

The same questions apply to recreation infrastructure. When will Molonglo receive its centrally located district sporting facilities needed for its rapidly growing population, not just a scaled back synthetic oval at Stromlo Forest Park? When will residents see a funded pathway to a new Woden aquatic facility, beyond strategy development and early planning? How will the government address the shortage of indoor sports courts and the growing demand for an indoor sports stadium, not only in Woden but across Canberra? These projects are not merely recreation projects; they are key pieces of economic and community infrastructure that can attract visitors, support surrounding businesses and strengthen town centres. The government also speaks about growing Canberra's visitor economy. But we do have one event now that is our second year, this year, in Woden. It is called *Killing Canberra*, which will bring around 80 artists to town to paint the drains in Woden, the longest legal graffiti wall in the Southern Hemisphere. This event presents opportunities to bring visitors to Woden and showcase the district. But attracting visitors is only the first step. What is the plan to encourage them to stay in the southside hotels, eat at local restaurants, visit local businesses and spend time in our town centre? How are we filling hotel rooms in the south? How are we supporting hospitality businesses in Woden? How are we ensuring that visitors spend in close to local businesses rather than being concentrated elsewhere?

The same question should be asked of Events ACT. Where is the strategy to activate the southside? The government reports extensively on major events and venues. But where are the measures showing the number of ACT supported events by district, the expenditure by district and the economic impact by district? If activating Civic can be an economic development strategy, surely activating town centres and group centres in the south can also be an economic development strategy. The CBR 2030 says:

Well planned and designed town and group centres strengthen local economies, support wellbeing and make it easier for people to live well.

I did not know whether to laugh or cry. This is a word salad. Please show me the well-planned and designed town and group centres? Let's start with Woden. Show me the plan. Until the government produces those plans, instead of just leaving it to the private sector, and demonstrates how the benefits will flow to communities across Canberra, it remains difficult to see how the promise of place-based economic development will become a reality for the people of Woden, Weston Creek, Molonglo and the inner south.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business and Industry, Minister for Arts, Creative Industries and the Night-Time Economy, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (7.51): The 2026-27 ACT budget reflects the government's commitment to a thriving creative sector, a skilled workforce and a strong economy. As Minister for Arts, Creative Industries and the Night-Time Economy, Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations and Minister for Business and Industry, I welcome the chance to outline key outcomes across my portfolios.

To support arts and creative industries, this budget delivers an additional \$8.6 million over four years to increase arts organisations funding by 25 per cent, delivering a key election commitment and recognising the value of the local arts and cultural sector. The Arts Organisation Investment Program will support 29 arts organisations and centres across the ACT, including three new companies. With this increase, the government will invest \$47.8 million in arts organisations over the next four years, enriching the city's cultural life and making Canberra more vibrant and inclusive.

The Canberra Screen and Games Fund, delivered with Screen Canberra, continues to grow local jobs, talent and Canberra's profile on the world stage. The budget includes an additional \$1.25 million over two years to build on this momentum. Recent successes include *The Long Run*; *Uppercut Games Magicians: The Devils Deal*, which was recently featured at the Xbox Games Showcase; the *Austin* TV series filming in Canberra; and *Poster Boy: Becoming Zyzx*, which reached No 1 on Stan just recently.

A strong economy needs a skilled workforce. The National Skills Agreement, a five-year agreement between the Australian government and states and territories, is driving event sector reform. This budget builds on that through the Clean Energy Capital Investment Fund, turbocharging the event workforce and the Advanced Entry Trade Training Agreement, strengthening training pathways and workforce capability. We are also finalising the extension of free TAFE for Canberrans, with the Australian government, delivering up to 9,039 additional fee-free training places over five years in priority industries, including construction, care, technology and tourism.

We are also investing directly to support businesses adapt, innovate and grow in changing economic circumstances. This includes almost \$1.5 million over four years to expand the Canberra Business Advice and Support Service, providing free tailored advice, including support for social enterprises and ultimate business models. Since 2023, CBASS has supported more than 900 businesses, with strong satisfaction rating for their service. The budget also continues support for Badgi, the ACTs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Business Support Program, plus industry events and engagement opportunities.

Economic and business growth must go hand in hand with improvements to workers protections. This budget expands inhouse rehabilitation services to help employees recover and return to work sooner, building on results since 2023. It also establishes a dedicated prosecution team within WorkSafe ACT to strengthen enforcement, accountability and safer workplaces. The Portable Long Service Leave Scheme will also expand in this financial year, giving more workers access to long service leave, with deliberate delays allowing businesses time to make the transition.

Across my portfolios, the 2026-27 budget invests in the people, industries and opportunities that will shape Canberra's future—from arts and creative industries, to skills, training, business growth and workplace protections. I commend the budget.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (7.56): I rise to speak to a few different elements of this line item in the budget—starting with the arts. As we know, the government sought to save over \$700 million in this budget by deferring infrastructure projects, which included delaying the full delivery of the Kingston Arts Precinct. What is clear is that the elements that are more commercially attractive have been brought forward, while others have been delayed.

I raised in estimates that arts organisations that were assessed to be housed in the Kingston Arts Precinct have been budgeting and applying for government funding and other funding on the assumption that they would move in on the schedule that had been outlined by the government on peppercorn rent arrangements with shared facilities and resources at the precinct. But, of course, this has not occurred and, as a consequence, we have significant uncertainty across the arts sector among these organisations regarding whether they will be able to remain viable in their existing arrangements. I think it is critical, given this project has been delayed in this budget, for this to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The reality is that it is not clearly addressed within the budget itself.

When we are seeing budget measures put forward, the consequences of those measures also need to be addressed. In this case, we have multiple organisations that may be on peppercorn rent arrangements, in which case they should be all right, but others are on commercial rental arrangements or perhaps discounted arrangements, but still paying more than they would be if they were in the Kingston Arts Precinct. They had been relying on the delivery of that project in full and on time. So this is an area for the government to continue working on.

We heard from some of those organisations that, for them, providing facilities to local artists is made challenging because of those arrangements. For example, they are not

able to allow artists to exhibit for free; they are required to charge a fee. But many government funding streams do not allow artists to apply if they are going to exhibit their works in spaces that are already receiving funding, because of the double-dipping risk. But, because of that, these artists are having to go elsewhere, go interstate, or not have opportunities at all.

There is also, clearly, nothing in this budget to increase support for our night-time economy and no budget funding for a night-time economy commissioner or coordinator. With that said, one of the committees that I am on has been inquiring into this. I do appreciate the now former night-time economy minister's constructive engagement and openness to the idea of establishing such a position within the public service as the hearings for that inquiry progress. This is something I am really keen to see funded as quickly as possible, whether it is in the budget review, a future budget or made up through existing resources. A night-time economy commissioner who knows how the industry works and can partner with venues, bookers and artists could do so much more to support Canberra's incredible potential as a thriving cultural hub. This is a massive opportunity for the ACT to follow other jurisdictions, including New South Wales and Queensland, who have already done this.

Another matter that I continue to raise, including through the budget estimates process, is the future of the Old Bus Depot Markets, which remains uncertain. We have been told for many months now that negotiations are ongoing with the existing operator to agree to a new licence. I can understand that, but I do think this is a test case in what it looks like to not properly engage prior to opening up a tender process. This is something we heard about through multiple elements of the budget. Just going out to market to see what you can find may, on the face of it, seem like a reasonable approach, but it can have negative consequences, and it absolutely has for the stallholders at the Old Bus Depot Markets—just, as we heard earlier in the budget debate—as it has for environmental organisations and climate advocacy organisations across the ACT. We are still no closer to finding out—at least the public is not and I am not—what is next for this historic community asset. When this tender process was first initiated, I said it was a mistake to go out to the market, essentially blindly, without first doing the groundwork of engaging with stallholders in our community more broadly. That has since been borne out in more than a year of delays. It is 20 months now since the tender process was announced.

One matter that has been raised in the estimates committee report is the pensioner rates rebate scheme. This is a rebate on rates providing a 50 per cent reduction, but it is capped at \$750. We learnt through the estimates process that seven per cent of recipients received a 50 per cent reduction rates. Presumably that means 93 per cent hit the cap, which is evidence that there is a good chance that the cap is set at too low of a level. It was last increased in 2021, from \$700 to \$750, and since then the average percentage increase in residential rates has been almost 22 per cent—so a significant increase in rates but not in the rates rebate. We know that pensioners are struggling with this. We were told by a government official during estimates an important point to note is that, in addition to the cap, pensioners can also defer their rates as a kind of relief mechanism. That is a mechanism, he said, that is there to help them manage cashflow pressures. But, of course, pensioners generally do not make more money further into the future. So, if that is the expectation, it is not really a solution for people who are eligible for this scheme. The estimates committee has recommended an ongoing increase to the cap

on the pensioner rates rebate pegged to the average increase in rates.

On sporting facilities, there is a lot to do in this area in terms of the provision of indoor sporting facilities and aquatic facilities. This area has been touched on a lot in this place, and so I will not go further into it here. Instead, I will skip ahead to Telstra Tower, which is the final item I would like to speak to in this part of the debate. Almost a decade of work has gone into plans for a Ngunnawal Cultural Tourism Centre at Telstra Tower. This was canvassed during estimates and it was canvassed in prior committee hearings. In 2023, Telstra and Ngunnawal custodians announced a joint endeavour with detailed plans to transform Telstra Tower into a world-class cultural tourism destination. But, in 2024, Ngunnawal custodians described feeling blindsided when the ACT government signed a letter of intent with Telstra to renovate and reopen the tower, with no mention of the plans that had been developed between Telstra and traditional custodians up until that point.

In April, the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation recommended that the ACT government take advantage of the pre-existing work done by Telstra in partnership with the Ngunnawal community on the future of Telstra Tower and ensure this earlier body of work is reflected in the government's decisions about the site. I think all that work would be both wasteful and deeply disrespectful to the traditional custodians who have been driving this process for almost a decade now. The ACT government has since signed a heads of agreement with Telstra—this happened in July. There is a clear question that remains unanswered from my perspective, which is: why weren't Ngunnawal custodians invited to sign up as a party to this new agreement? This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to put Telstra Tower back on the map as an iconic cultural landmark and, if traditional custodians are not leading the cultural direction of the redevelopment, then the project risks losing the very purpose that made it so significant in the first place. So I hope the ACT government pursues a heads of agreement with Ngunnawal custodians, because that is genuine shared decision-making that respects self-determination, as the government should be pursuing.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (8.04): The Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate is an interesting creation. Over time, it seems to have been the product of centralising control under one man. The Chief Minister over time did become essentially the centre of government, where fiscal policy, taxation, procurement, industrial relations and economic development all came together, and this is the directorate that we see today. So, if we want to understand whether this government is managing the territory well, it is really the first place we need to look.

What we see is that a government that has spent years insisting that the budget was under control, only to be confronted time and again and again and by evidence that said otherwise, has had to suddenly start to face up to reality. Earlier this year, Saul Eslake was brought in by a committee to undertake an independent assessment of the territory's fiscal sustainability. His conclusion was pretty straightforward. The deterioration in the ACT's finances was not simply something that happened to us. As it turns out, it was driven by conscious policy decisions to spend more without raising enough additional revenue to cover that spending. His final report warned that tolerating continued deficits—cash deficits, not cash operating deficits—and ever-increasing debt would ultimately prove unsustainable. That one finding stripped away all the years of excuses.

The government has had plenty of excuses. Over time, the government blamed the commonwealth; it blamed the GFC; it blamed economic conditions; it certainly blamed the pandemic enough; it blamed revenue constraints; and, now, in this budget, it is blaming all of the international uncertainty. Those things do create some degree of uncertainty, and some of them were absolutely shocks. They were economic shocks that this territory, like everywhere else in the world, had to try and deal with and withstand. I think it is really important to note that most of the rest of the world had recoveries that have outpaced the ACT. One of the other important things to note is that, at the same time as all of that uncertainty, Mr Eslake's work, and ultimately the fiscal sustainability committee itself, found that it was those government policy choices that were responsible for the deterioration in the budget while, as Mr Eslake pointed out, the things outside of the government's control—those technical adjustments that appear in the budget—actually improved the baseline. So the circumstances improved the baseline and the government's policy choices resulted in deterioration.

The government now wants us to believe that this budget represents some sort of turnaround, an improving headline net operating balance again, and has pointed to an operating cash surplus. But that is not the measure that was recommended. There are deeper concerns about whether, even on that measure that he has presented, the ACT is actually balancing the books, because the turnaround was in things that cannot necessarily go towards day-to-day operating expenses. After years of promises that balance was just around the corner, going to appear across the new forward estimates—rewritten every year to say, “Absolutely, things are on the way”—it has been demonstrated over time that this government cannot achieve what it says it is going to do. It is time to stop pretending that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow—because the government has already spent it.

The broader picture is deeply concerning. The Parliamentary Budget Office's latest *National Fiscal Outlook* puts the ACT second only to the Northern Territory for forecast net debt per person—ahead of ahead of Victoria, ahead of New South Wales, ahead of every other state. Think about that. We are one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in the country. As we were talking about earlier today, Canberrans' incomes are notionally higher; we have a highly educated population; we have relatively high household incomes; and we have enjoyed decades of economic growth. Yet the government has managed to put the ACT second in the country for net debt per capita. That is not an achievement; it is a warning, because the interest bill follows the debt. The PBO, Parliamentary Budget Office, now places the ACT alongside Victoria and South Australia as facing the highest debt-servicing burdens relative to revenue in the country.

Across Australia, more and more government revenue is being swallowed by interest, but the ACT is racing ahead. That means that every year more of the money collected from Canberrans is already spoken for before a nurse is employed, before a teacher walks into a classroom, before a police officer goes on patrol and before a road is repaired. That is the cost of debt, and Canberrans are already paying extraordinary levels of tax. Data published by the South Australian Treasury showed the ACT had the highest taxation revenue per capita of any state or territory in 2024-25. The ACT's own 2026-27 budget shows own-source taxation per person consuming 11.7 per cent of household disposable income per person—the highest proportion of any jurisdiction

shown. But this revenue is not going to services for Canberrans; it is going first and foremost for the debt—but only to pay the interest bill.

This government is not starved of revenue. I know that is what it tries to tell us. Sure, there are some limits, but the excuses do not match the statistics. Canberrans are paying. They are paying through rates; they are paying through payroll tax flowing through the economy; and they are paying through duties, fees and charges. But, despite that, we have one of the worst debt positions in the country. The government, after collecting more and more and more, still fails to get expenditure and revenue into a sustainable relationship. Treasury is supposed to be the discipline at the centre of government. The Treasurer's job is to say no when spending cannot be justified. It is to make sure that the numbers stack up, to make sure that, as the ACT moves forward and as the government moves forward with things, the promises about how much things would cost stay within the controls. The Treasurer's job is to make sure the consequences are anticipated. But too often we are seeing promises made first, leaving the consequences to be dealt with later.

This question of discipline clearly extends to procurement. The treasury and finance portfolios are not merely responsible for collecting revenue and publishing budget papers; they sit at the centre of the way billions of dollars of public money are spent. After the integrity failures we have seen through government procurement, that responsibility should weigh heavily indeed. The government passed procurement amendments which it says will make procurement easier for local businesses and simplify low-value processes while maintaining transparency and value for money. We have welcomed those objectives. But Operation Kingfisher and the concerns that have followed, put those changes in a new light. They tell us that legislative tightening is not enough. Public confidence depends on knowing that contracts are awarded fairly, that tenders compete on merit and that confidential information stays confidential. (*Second speaking period taken.*)

Public confidence depends on confidence that political relationships or external influence do not determine who gets access to public work. The standard has to apply right across government. As the Canberra Liberals have brought up again and again, the integrity of our procurement system is directly related to the government's procurement systems, including the so-called Secure Local Jobs Code. Despite the admirable name, the system has failed to deliver its mandated objectives. The Secure Local Jobs Code continues to impose certification, workforce planning and compliance requirements on businesses seeking territory-funded work.

The government continues to operate an advisory structure around the code—an administrative structure—and certification can determine whether a business is able to compete for contracts. That gives the government a serious responsibility to demonstrate that the code is objective, proportionate and actually supporting local employment. The Public Accounts and Administration Committee now has a large job to do, considering whether the code is achieving those objectives around local jobs, workplace standards and value for money, and that inquiry exists because the questions are unanswered.

Industrial relations policy cannot become a substitute for procurement integrity. Workplace rights need be protected, and there are mechanisms that do that; workers

should be paid properly, and there are mechanisms to do that; and employers must obey the law. But enforcement needs to be objective, transparent and consistently applied through the right channels. Businesses should not have to wonder whether they are competing on capability, price and performance or navigating a political industrial relations framework.

This is the broader story of the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development in this budget. On fiscal management, the government is asking us to trust forecasts after years of missing them, of telling us one thing and landing another—years and years of the mythical rainbow surplus that is always over the next hill. On debt, we are second only to the Northern Territory per person; on interest, we face one of the heaviest burdens relative to revenue; on tax, Canberrans are already at the top nationally; and on procurement and industrial relations, serious questions remain about whether the frameworks administered by this directorate are delivering fairness, competition and value for money.

These issues do not exist in isolation. They all come back to the same question: does this government exercise discipline with the power and money entrusted to it? That is the test, and this government does not achieve a passing grade. The government needs to confront the evidence despite it being something it does not seem to want to hear. Saul Eslake has given the government all the study material they could need, so has the fiscal sustainability committee. The Parliamentary Budget Office is giving us another warning. The question is whether Labor finally gets around to listening, whether it finally learns the lesson, even if it is 15 years overdue. Canberrans are already paying and they should not be asked to carry the cost of another decade of weak discipline, rising debt, growing interest and systems that fail to deliver value for money. There is a standard that Canberrans have every right to expect. After decades this government has had its shot. It has a very small window to try and turn things around, but Canberrans have every right to expect better.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Superannuation Provision Account—Part 1.8

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (8.19): I do not want to speak for long on this item, but I think it is—

Mr Barr: I hope not.

MR COCKS: I know that the Treasurer does not want me to speak for long. He does not like to hear some things, but he needs to face some reality—and we will see if we can give him a quick dose of reality now. The Superannuation Provision Account has been at the heart of some of the most technical and frustrating debates this Assembly has seen in terms of financial management. The use of the Superannuation Provision Account and interest on the money set aside for public servants' superannuation to try and claim surpluses over time through the headline net operating balance, as it is called—a measure which is not used anywhere else in the country; a measure that does not fall within the accepted practices across the country—has been debated and discussed endlessly, it seems sometimes, here.

But, this year, we have a new interesting factor that has cropped up. The Treasurer tells us that he has achieved a cash operating surplus. What was it that triggered a miraculous turnaround at the last minute in the government's fortunes to be able to achieve that? It was, in fact, interest on investments. As far as I can see, that includes interest on the Superannuation Provision Account. There is something very important to note about the interest on that account: that money cannot be spent on anything except for public servants' superannuation. That is legislated. That means that the cash operating surplus reported by the government this year does not actually mean that it has managed to cover its day-to-day costs. A cash operating surplus should be a minimum hurdle for any government to achieve. Every government ought to be able to pay for its day-to-day costs. But, even on that measure, once you look at what funding is tied where, the government has not been able to achieve it.

There is also another factor that I think people neglect to pay attention to at times. The government has been claiming the headline net operating balance as an achievement over time—that, in the future, the headline net operating balance is going to be the turnaround that the ACT deserves. That is built on assumptions around the Superannuation Provision Account. What the government likes to forget is that that is a Liberal achievement. It was Canberra Liberals that established the big investments that drive the balance of that account today. It was Canberra Liberals that had the foresight to actually put some money away to start to cover the expenses that could be seen down the track. After the initial work of the Canberra Liberals, it was Jon Stanhope who continued to put some additional money away each year.

In recent years, we have heard the Chief Minister and then Treasurer at the time—I do not know if the current Treasurer has made this comment—start to talk about how their prudent management was working towards paying down that superannuation liability, the unfunded superannuation liability. What we have seen happen this year is that the timeframe for that has been pushed back. Part of the reason for that has to be that the current Chief Minister, while Treasurer, was the first one ever to stop putting away a little bit extra; to stop adding an extra allocation in the budget to pay down that debt, to increase the money going into the Superannuation Provision Account. Instead, the current Chief Minister—and it is a practice that is being followed by the current Treasurer—just kept it level. The amount going into the Superannuation Provision Account was equal to the amount coming out in benefit payments. The effect of that is that we are no longer getting ahead of the game. All of the benefit comes from that hard work the Canberra Liberals, Chief Ministers and Treasurers did all those years ago, followed up by the early Labor Chief Ministers thereafter. In fact, the current Chief Minister was the first Treasurer ever to underfund the Superannuation Provision Account; to put less in than had to be taken out for benefits. And that puts us back further.

It is a weirdly technical line item, but it has a big effect on the spin that this government chooses to apply to its budget narrative—because it is not prudent financial management that has resulted in a cash operating surplus; it is a lucky windfall. It is not from today's prudent management; it is from yesterday's. The hard work was done years ago. It is about time we had a government that did the hard work now to make sure we are set up for tomorrow.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (8.27): The Superannuation Provision Account carries one of the ACT government's largest financial liabilities, and its performance depends heavily on investment returns. At a time of volatile share markets, fluctuating bond yields and growing uncertainty in the global economy, we need a clearer understanding of the risks facing this fund. If investment returns fall short of expectations or economic conditions deteriorate, the government may be required to make larger contributions to ensure pension obligations can still be met—and currently they are running at about \$680 million. It is a lot. That would place additional pressure on an already-stretched budget and, ultimately, on ACT taxpayers—let alone the impact of refinancing the government's borrowings not held in this account. With increasing bond yields, the increase in interest payments could be significant.

The government needs to be transparent about these emerging risks. What stress testing has been undertaken? What would happen if markets underperform for an extended period? How much additional funding might be required to pay superannuation pensions? Given the size of this liability, the Assembly deserves a clear assessment of the risks arising from an increasingly uncertain global economic environment and how the government plans to manage them when it could impact further on the ability to service the services that we need in this city.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Housing ACT—Part 1.9

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (8.28): I would like to present the following speech on behalf of our shadow minister for public housing and homelessness, Ms Chiaka Barry MLA:

Mr Assistant Speaker, when it comes to public housing, the government is failing our most vulnerable. You do not need to scratch far beneath the surface to get a true picture of the abysmal state of public housing in our territory. For Canberra, we heard in our estimates hearings that if you are on the priority list for public housing—we are talking about the worst of the worst situations; there is not a higher category of urgency—if you are one of the 174 people on that list, you are still waiting for almost six months for a home. If you are on the high needs list—and there are just shy of 2,000 people and families in our community on that list—you are waiting for over three years. Mr Assistant Speaker, if you have heard some of the stories from the people on this list about how desperate their situations are, you would be appalled that they are waiting for over three years. Finally, if you are listed as a regular applicant—and there are over 1,500 people in Canberra on that list—you are waiting for over five years to be offered a property—five years, Mr Assistant Speaker.

Meanwhile, this government has instituted a new human right to housing, which will come into effect in four short months. My question to the government is: how exactly does it propose to give effect to this right when there are over 3,600 people currently on the waiting list for public housing, and on which the vast majority of them will remain for years?

Every other day, I am contacted by members of our community whose stories tear gaping holes in the government's optimistic “nothing to see here” reporting on its public

housing record. The government's pat-on-the-back narrative in this space is worlds away from the stories that we are told by public housing tenants day after day. There is an elderly resident who went without heating for most of winter, while she waited for her heater to be fixed. There is the mother who was told that she and her five children would be accommodated in a two-bedroom hotel room while waiting for maintenance on their property. There are the vulnerable applicants who are approved on the highest priority list who have contacted me and who are still without a tenancy, having waited for over a year. This is the real story of how the ACT government manages its resources when it comes to public housing.

The estimates committee sounded the alarm on the government's management of public housing this time last year, when it published a recommendation that the government ensure tenant communications were clear and timely, establish accessible complaints channels, conduct regular tenant satisfaction surveys, and regularly report on the number of complaints received. It is beyond belief that an estimates committee would need to resort to publishing a recommendation like this that calls for the government to uphold such baseline standards—standards which should go without saying.

It speaks volumes about the government's public housing neglect over so many years and how far public housing habitability has dropped under our 24-year-old Labor government. Fast forward one year on from that recommendation and, unfortunately, I am not confident that much has changed. In this year's estimates committee hearings, we had officials resigning themselves to this government's failures, stating, "I think the maths speaks for itself. There's not enough housing to meet the 3,500 on the waitlist."

The government has decided, for better or worse, to insource public housing maintenance—an admission, if you will, of the systemic failures facilitated by the government's past mismanagement. Domestic violence services this year shared the story of a victim-survivor who had to wait for weeks just to have a simple lock change on their public housing property. If only I could show you the photos, Mr Assistant Speaker, of the enormous holes in the roofs and the buckets littering the floors of tenants' homes, because they have to catch the rainwater pouring through their roofs.

The tragic part of all this is that so often I am contacted by public housing tenants that call my office who genuinely do not realise that the abysmal conditions that they are enduring are unacceptable. So many have been living in such deplorable conditions for so long that they resign themselves to an expectation that this is their lot, that they should not complain, that they should not expect to live comfortably if they are living in government housing.

We recently received a call from a tenant that had been living in their home for years and years with holes in their roof. It never occurred to them to complain, because they thought that was just what they had to put up with. They could not afford the private rental market.

We are a small jurisdiction. We have had the same government in power for over 24 years. We have a projected \$12.5 billion in net debt, yet the government cannot seem to put a roof over the heads of the most vulnerable members of our community. The government can dress up this budget however it likes, but the government is not fooling these tenants. It is not fooling the 3½ thousand desperate Canberrans on the waiting list,

and it is not fooling the Canberra Liberals opposition.

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (8.35): I rise to speak on the importance of housing policy and housing investment in the territory. Getting housing right is the difference between whether people can put down roots in their community, whether their families can build a secure future, and whether young people, essential workers and older Canberrans can afford to remain in the place that they call home. That is why I welcome government making housing a central priority of the 2026-27 budget.

The Greens have long held that fairness and equity in housing is one of the defining features of our time, for our city and the wonderful people who live in it, and for the country writ large. We will note, though, that it is a good start, but there is so much more to do.

It is pleasing to see that this budget has continued investment in public housing, which, again, we see as the central plank of solving the housing crisis that we are in. For too long, governments across Australia have relied on the assumption that the private market would and could solve housing need. We have very much seen the limits of that approach. That approach has seen too many people remain locked out of secure and affordable housing, while public housing waitlists grow and rental stress increases. Housing is a public good. A house is a home. It should not be seen primarily as an investment asset. That is why it is critical that government acts not only as a regulator of housing but as a direct provider of housing.

This budget continues the investment towards delivering 13,200 public dwellings by 2030, including 1,100 new public homes over the decade. It also supports the target of delivering 1,000 public housing property renewals and 400 additional public housing dwellings by 2027. These are issues that we have been talking about for a long time.

It was somewhat concerning in the estimates process to discover that there is still a significant proportion—almost 300 of those public homes—that still do not have the funding to be delivered. This is work that future budgets will have to deliver.

The investments do, however, recognise that public housing remains the most effective way to provide genuinely affordable homes. With rents linked to income, these homes remain accessible to people on low and fixed incomes. That is why we need a diversity of tenants in public housing. It should be the landlord of first choice, not the landlord of last resort. While we welcome this investment, we know it is only the beginning of what Canberra needs, particularly when we have more than 3,600 people sitting on the housing waiting list, with many of them sitting there for years, even though they have significant needs.

We often hear the term “affordable housing”, but not all housing described as affordable is housing that people can afford. Housing priced below market rates certainly plays a role in the mix of housing available to people, but “market rates” for rents are higher than ever, and well beyond what a minimum-wage worker can afford. “Slightly lower than exorbitant” is different from public housing, where rents are connected to a person’s income and capacity to pay.

We have to focus on ensuring that affordability is real and meaningful for members of

our community. That means delivering thousands of additional public homes, alongside the community and affordable housing already available. The success of our housing system should not be measured only by the numbers of dwellings delivered, but whether people on ordinary incomes can afford to live in them.

It is pleasing to see in this budget continued support for the community housing sector, and we are seeing some significant movement in this area that is welcome. A fair housing system must also provide support for those facing homelessness. I welcome the budget's investment in crisis and transitional housing for vulnerable Canberrans experiencing homelessness. Expanding access to safe accommodation is a vital part of providing stability and helping people to reconnect with housing, support services and the community.

It is good to see the additional \$16.9 million provided for frontline homelessness services, including Samaritan House, Roadhouse, Blue Door and Our Place Braddon, while also strengthening support for ACT Shelter, as the peak advocacy organisation. These organisations do essential work every day, supporting Canberrans through some of the most difficult circumstances of their lives.

People facing long-term homelessness can often require more than just a roof over their heads. They need access to stable housing, alongside wraparound service supports that assist them to maintain tenancies, improve health outcomes and reconnect with their communities.

However, we know that these organisations can only do so much, and the Greens will always advocate for interventions at a systemic level to make sure that the housing system is fairer for everyone. Ultimately, housing affordability is a matter of fairness; it is a matter of dignity, and it is a matter of rights. Every person deserves access to a safe, secure and affordable home, yet too many Canberrans are struggling with rising housing costs, insecure housing arrangements and limited prospects of entering the housing market.

When housing becomes unaffordable, it affects workers, families, students, older people and those on low incomes. It affects our economy, our communities and our people's sense of security. That is why governments must continue to intervene directly, expanding public housing, investing in homelessness services, providing support for community housing, and providing practical support to households under pressure. They are all necessary parts of the solution.

This budget continues the important work of increasing public housing supply, supporting people experiencing homelessness and ensuring government plays an active role in delivering housing outcomes. However, there remains so much more work to do. I implore the Assembly to consider that, for things to change for the better in our city and amongst our community, housing cannot remain a commodity. We must continue to invest, and invest significantly. We must look at housing as a home, a foundation for dignity, security and opportunity.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (8.43): I will try to keep my comments brief. I am touching on some matters that other members have already touched on and that we have spoken about in this place, starting with vacant public housing properties.

As of June this year, there were 588 public housing properties sitting vacant. I understand that there are complexities behind why that is the case. We need to resolve those. Those vacancies increased by more than 50 since the start of the year, in the first half of this year, from 532 to 588. When this number was at 532 vacant properties, 38 per cent of them were in the electorate of Kurrajong—central Canberra, a place where many people would like to live. Vacancies include 188 homes ready to be allocated to new tenants, 285 homes undergoing repairs or upgrades, and 57 awaiting decisions about their future.

Properties awaiting maintenance or upgrades remained vacant for an average of 284 days, as of June 2026. I have touched on this statistic many times, but I think it is a remarkable one: nationally, the ACT ranks second-worst in the country in terms of the condition of our public housing stock.

Further, Housing ACT's public housing occupancy target of 96 per cent, which we have all agreed could be, and should be, more ambitious, was not on track to be met in the last financial year. Meanwhile, as Mr Cain reflected on, the public housing waitlist has grown, and it continues to grow. In the same period, vacancies grew by more than 50. The public housing waiting list grew by more than 150 approved households. That is 3,652 approved applicants, which could be 7½ thousand or 8,000 people that are affected and that are sitting on that waitlist.

Since 2024, the public housing waitlist has increased by over 600 households. We are doing nowhere near enough to address this. The average wait time is more than five months for priority housing and more than five years for standard housing. You need to have significant additional needs in order to qualify for the priority list; then you are still waiting for five months. But if you are just a good, old-fashioned “cannot afford private rental market”, you are waiting for five years. You are on that standard housing list; you are just not getting into public housing.

Meanwhile, the ACT has the highest rate of persistent homelessness in the country. If you become homeless here, you are more likely to stay homeless than you would be anywhere else in Australia. In 2023-24, almost 1,000 children from the age of 12 to 17 received assistance from Canberra's homelessness services. Many were alone when they presented for help, unaccompanied by a parent or another family member, all while these services remain underfunded and overwhelmed.

We should pause and reflect on these statistics—almost a thousand children, many alone—and note that they are not just numbers; they are members of our community who need our help, who look to us in this place and ask, “Why aren't you doing more for us?”

With that said, in this budget there is some welcome news. The \$641 million commitment for public and community housing and improved public housing maintenance is welcome. There is \$364 million for new housing dwellings, a \$183 million funding uplift for maintenance and repairs, and a loan guarantee scheme to help community housing providers to deliver, hopefully, more than a thousand affordable homes through round 3 of the Housing Australia Future Fund. This is all very welcome.

The budget estimates committee did note that this funding, of course, was not enough to meet the full commitment to grow the Housing ACT portfolio to 13,200 dwellings by 2030, which, in and of itself, we already know is not enough, given the waitlist that we currently have. The government's response was that this would be subject to a future budget process. Of course, I get it; it is understandable. You make decisions, and you make announcements with each budget.

I think that, given the level of interest in this, it is right to provide more information to our community about what is the medium-term plan. 2030 is not all that far away. How does the government intend to hit that? Also, how does the government intend to maintain its projections in terms of budget sustainability, while hitting those targets with this extra investment?

The reality is that, in the housing context we are currently experiencing in the ACT, we have record high rents and an affordability crisis, and a clear need for a radical shift from treating housing primarily as a financial asset to a means to meet a fundamental human right. This is a shift that we are talking about at an individual level. This federal policy setting is trying to drive that shift at an individual level, but it also has to occur at a government level.

In some sense, I can understand the government being reluctant to put too much more into its public housing stock, because every new public housing dwelling is essentially a liability. You are getting below market rent, of course, and that is the purpose; that is the idea. But every additional house added to the stock is an ongoing liability to the territory from a maintenance and repairs perspective, and from the perspective of paying rates on those properties. It costs the government.

It is not an attractive investment, but this is critical social infrastructure, and it has not been treated in that way for a long time. We do not invest in hospitals because they make us money. We do not invest in education in public schools because they make us money. We do not invest in footpaths or in playgrounds because they make us money. We do not invest in our playing fields because they make us money.

We invest because this is critical social infrastructure that we need to invest in, and the fact that it has not occurred over many decades in the space of housing has left us paying the price elsewhere, because those costs do not go away; they just show up elsewhere. The human cost shows up elsewhere, and the financial costs show up in other parts of our service systems—in the justice system, in the health system and so on. This is something that we are constantly talking about in this place, and that will continue to be the case, because it is clear that, ultimately, the budget does need to be restructured to put more of a focus on housing.

I do welcome the changes in the announcements in this budget; they are significant, and they should not be dismissed. I think that is important. At the same time, I want to make it clear that this is something that I, and, I am sure, many other members, will continue to push the government on, moving forward, in budget reviews and future budgets.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (8.50): The government's commitment to grow public housing is welcome, but we need greater transparency about how it will be

delivered to meet the needs of the people on the growing housing list. The housing renewal program will finish, and we do not know what the new plan is to deliver the housing we need. What type of housing is needed? Homes for large families, smaller places for singles and supported housing with wraparound services for those who need those services? If we are going to meet the target by 2030, the Assembly needs an annual net growth trajectory for each type of housing. Will they be built or bought? Is the land available and ready for construction?

As we all know, maintenance also remains a significant concern. Tenants need faster turnaround times for the over 550 empty properties, particularly those that need routine work, such as painting, carpeting and deep cleans. The budget should also set clear improvement targets for tenants experience, explaining how additional maintenance funding will improve outcomes and provide a clear implementation plan for the transition to insource maintenance services.

Finally, we need greater focus on disability housing, including access to the commonwealth Specialist Disability Accommodation, SDA, funding and a solution that can be sorted out with the housing providers—for example, Havelock Housing—that manage many of these homes. The government also needs better IT that delivers better, timely information and improves decision-making, rather than creating additional bureaucracy. This budget needs stronger targets, clearer reporting and a credible long-term plan to ensure more homes are delivered, fewer remain vacant and tenants receive the quality housing services they deserve.

MS ORR (Yerrabi—Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, Minister for Disability, Autism and Neurodiversity, Minister for Housing and Homelessness, and Minister for Equality) (8.52): Safe and stable housing is the foundation for better health, stronger communities and improved life outcomes. This year's ACT budget makes a generational investment in delivering more social, public, community and affordable homes for Canberrans.

Over the past 12 years, through programs like Growing and Renewing, the ACT government has funded the replacement of over 2,300 properties, which is approximately 20 per cent of the housing portfolio. This was a much-needed effort to replace some of our oldest, least fit for purpose properties with new high-quality homes. Now that the Growing and Renewing Program is approaching its end, we are concentrating on growth. The ACT government has committed to increasing the territory's social housing portfolio to 13,200 properties by 2030, ensuring vulnerable Canberrans have access to secure, well-maintained homes, that provide not just shelter but also dignity and stability.

We are taking action on all fronts by boosting supply and investing in the upkeep of existing homes, so they remain safe and fit for purpose. To support our objective, the ACT government is launching a new public housing pipeline program, backed by an additional \$364 million investment over four years, to build and buy an additional 450 new homes for the territory-owned portfolio. Supported by the Territory Priority Projects legislation, the program will enable Canberrans to move into these homes sooner. This program will use a hybrid delivery model, combining new builds on greenfield land, redevelopment of existing sites and market acquisitions to accelerate

delivery and respond to market conditions.

We are working with the Australian government so that more than half of these dwellings can be supported for funding by the ACT government through the commonwealth government's Housing Australia Future Fund Facility round 3, or HAFFF 3. Government-owned HAFFF 3 dwellings will be managed and operated by community housing providers over a period of 25 years. These homes are delivered in addition to the 364 properties currently being delivered as part of the last phase of the Growing and Renewing public housing program, the Social Housing Accelerator and the HAFF round 2, ensuring housing projects that are already planned, approved or underway, are completed on time. Funding for these other programs includes over \$55 million in the 2026-27 financial year to finalise the Growing and Renewing housing program and over \$37 million to be released over two years, from the 2026-27 financial year, to complete the Social Housing Accelerator Program. This funding was already set aside in previous budgets. So this is about turning committed funding into completed homes for Canberrans who need it the most. The completion of these homes will help more people transition out of homelessness or housing stress to stable long-term accommodation.

As I mentioned earlier, we are also investing to improve the upkeep of our existing housing portfolio, ensuring these homes can continue to support vulnerable Canberrans. The ACT government has also committed to a major step-up in investment in existing public housing, with \$183.4 million in additional funding over four years to strengthen public housing repairs and maintenance. In total, this brings the program to a \$401.5 million investment over four years and supports a balanced approach across reactive repairs, planned upgrades and bringing vacant properties back into use. Through the midyear budget review investment, we have already seen the time it takes for newly vacant houses to be turned around decreased from 21 days in quarter 1 of 2025-26 to just eight days in quarter 4, 2025-26, ready to be allocated to a new tenant.

The \$183.4 million in additional funding will further strengthen our repairs and maintenance pipeline, allowing for faster priority turnarounds while we further expand our Housing ACT stock. The ACT government has made a commitment to progressively insource some public housing repairs and maintenance services to achieve better outcomes for tenants. The ACT government is investing \$15.8 million in the 2026-27 budget to progressively insource key components of public housing repairs and maintenance services. The next step in this process is the insourcing of disability modifications and security upgrades in public housing. These important works will be managed by the ACT government from later this year.

Cost-of-living pressures and homelessness are deeply interconnected. When rents rise faster than incomes and household expenses continue to increase, more people face the risk of housing insecurity. For some, a financial setback, a family breakdown, health issue or loss of employment can quickly lead to homelessness. This is why the government has provided \$16.92 million over four years in new funding for the continuation of homelessness support services. This includes \$9.3 million to support more homelessness services, consisting of \$7.3 million for food relief services, youth services and tenancy and property management supports; \$1.08 million for ACT Shelter to continue its peak advocacy role for housing and homelessness; \$0.96 million to index the homelessness baseline funding envelope by the community sector indexation;

another \$5.2 million to better tailor solutions to meet the individual needs of those experiencing chronic homelessness, including an additional \$75 properties; and \$2.4 million to support the implementation of the Oaks Estate Strategic Plan through the continuation of the Community Inclusion Program, helping make Oaks Estate a safer, healthier and more connected community, while addressing complex social and housing challenges experienced by many social housing residents.

A safe and secure home is vital to fostering wellbeing in our community. In this budget we have delivered on our commitment to establish financial support for low-income households experiencing financial stress within the new Housing Crisis Support Fund. The \$5.162 million fund will help private renters in rental stress with a one-off payment of up to four weeks rent, up to a maximum of \$2,500. It will also offer a new \$250 crisis support payment to private renters in significant rental stress, for those paying more than 60 per cent income on rent, to help with essential household costs. A separate \$250 crisis support payment will be available to newly-housed public housing tenants at the start of their tenancy to help with the cost of setting up a new home. This payment will be available only in the 2026-27 financial year and until funding is exhausted.

Improving housing and homes outcomes and improving access and connectivity is the basis behind the government providing \$1.3 million to digitise its 25,000 active files. This will have a measurable benefit for decreasing information security risks and decreasing costs for physical file storage. The government is investing \$21.4 million to support the continued delivery of tenant-centric public services through adequate resourcing to support the ongoing sustainability of Housing ACT, including frontline staffing and property rates. This funding will improve the condition and functionality of public housing properties through a balanced program of responsive repairs, planned maintenance and upgrades. A key priority of this investment is turning around vacant properties more quickly by funding the works needed to return homes to a liveable standard. This will help reduce vacancy periods, maximise the use of existing public housing stock and, most importantly, get more people into homes sooner.

Beyond Housing ACT, we are supporting all housing across Canberra and there is significant investment in land release, supporting nearly 26,000 new homes to be built across Canberra. We have removed stamp duty for all first home buyers; expanded stamp duty concessions for pensioners and eligible NDIS participants; and we are backing our Missing Middle reforms to build more homes within our urban footprint. ACT Labor and this government is delivering a generational investment in homes for Canberrans, and this budget delivers a significant amount.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Digital Canberra—Part 1.10

MR PARTON (Brindabella) (9.00): I will speak briefly on Digital Canberra and its role in the health portfolio specifically. The reason this matters in an appropriations debate is pretty simple. Digital Canberra is not about government websites and IT systems; it is increasingly responsible for technology that directly affects how patients receive care and how clinicians do their jobs. The government's own budget says, "Digital Canberra will lead the development and implementation of digital health capabilities across the ACT public health system with a focus on interoperability, data

integrity, cybersecurity and user experience.” When we are appropriating hundreds of millions of dollars to Digital Canberra, there needs to be accountability for what that investment is actually delivering in health.

MyDHR is the obvious example. There is no question that a digital health record can provide enormous benefits. The government points to hundreds of thousands of active MyDHR users and significant clinical benefits from the Digital Health Record. The MyDHR rollout was originally budgeted at \$151.8 million. The eight-year program cost is now reported at \$378.2 million—more than \$226 million above the original business case. Even against the government’s revised 2019-20 business case of \$213.8 million, the program was \$164 million higher. That is why, when the government asked this Assembly to appropriate more money for digital transformation, it is entirely reasonable to ask for an independent assessment of what that investment has actually delivered. That is why an independent post-implementation review of MyDHR is important. The same principle applies to HealthLink and the referral pathway. If a digital system is supposed to make referrals easier and care more connected, we need to know whether it is actually doing that for GPs, specialists and for patients.

We have heard concerns about referral processes and administrative burden. If only you had the chance to speak to this line, Ms Stephen-Smith.

Ms Stephen-Smith: I do.

MR PARTON: We have heard concerns about referral processes, administrative burden and the visibility of where a referral is sitting. Again, this is not an argument against technology; it is an argument for making sure the technology we are paying for actually improves the health system.

Then there is the issue of artificial intelligence and case noting. During question time last week there was ambiguity from the minister. So it raises further questions about what exactly is being implemented, how it is being used and what oversight applies when AI is involved in clinical documentation. That ambiguity is not something that should simply be brushed aside because the technology is new. If AI is going to be used in a health setting, clinicians and patients should be able to understand what it is doing, what it is not doing and who remains responsible for the clinical record. That is the standard we should expect from an appropriation of public money.

Digital Canberra has an important role to play in improving our health system, and we will be paying close attention. But digital transformation cannot be an end in itself. The test is whether these systems can make care safer, make information more accessible, reduce administrative burden, improve referrals and ultimately improve the experience of patients and clinicians. We are appropriating the money; the government therefore needs to demonstrate what that money is delivering.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH (Kurrajong—Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education, Minister for Child Development and Wellbeing, Minister for Finance, Minister for the Public Service, and Minister for Health Infrastructure) (9.04): I was not going to speak about digital health, that no longer being my portfolio, but given that Minister Paterson is not in the chamber at the moment, I feel compelled to respond to Mr Parton’s comments, particularly because it was only in June this year that I tabled the Walsh

review report, formerly called the *Inquiry into ACT health system data, demand and processes: final inquiry report*, which was completed in May 2026. Part of the terms of reference for this report was specifically to look at the implementation and effectiveness of the Digital Health Record. That was a terms of reference that was put forward by this Assembly, but, unfortunately, Mr Parton does not seem to be happy with the fact that Mr Walsh, an expert in electronic health records and the delivery of e-health, had positive things to say about the Digital Health Record and its implementation. He now seems to want us to spend money on yet another review of the implementation of the Digital Health Record. It seems like the Canberra Liberals are happy to keep spending taxpayer money on more and more reviews until they get the answer that they want rather than just the one that is actually true, which has been demonstrated by an independent person, as Mr Parton sought to have a look at and review this matter previously.

In my own portfolio, with the responsibility for the broad range of programs within Digital Canberra, it is really a privilege to speak to this 26-27 budget this evening. Digital technology is essential to almost every aspect of government service delivery. It supports, as we have talked about, our health system. It supports education services, community programs, emergency response capabilities, regulatory functions and the everyday interactions Canberrans have with government. As Canberra grows and community expectations evolve, the government must continue investing in digital foundations that enable reliable, secure and accessible public services, or, to put it another way, digital capability is becoming vital infrastructure for our modern city.

Through this budget the government is providing almost \$302 million in expense funding for Digital Canberra, the ACT government's central digital and technology capability, in 2026-27. This includes \$68.2 million in new expense funding in 2026-27 and \$70.5 million over the forward estimates across ongoing delivery of the Digital Health Strategy, upgrading digital systems and hardware, enterprise resource planning, project development, digital driver licences, the National Firearms Register, Infrastructure Canberra and Digital Canberra sustainability.

The budget also provides \$34.6 million in capital funding over four years to strengthen and renew vital digital infrastructure that supports government operations and the territory's frontline services. We are making substantial investments to renew critical government ICT infrastructure and hardware through a whole-of-government strategic asset management program. This will replace ageing technology assets and invest in life cycle management practices to optimise decision-making and long-term planning for technology investments.

Funding has been provided to commence the planning, design and testing of a future ACT digital driver licence. This work will include discovery, prototype development and community-based user testing to ensure any future solution reflects the needs and experiences of Canberrans. A digital driver licence will provide a convenient and secure way to support identity verification and support Canberrans who choose to access ACT government services through digital channels. Aligning with national and international interoperability standards will ensure the licence can be used in more places and for more purposes. Importantly, the ACT government is taking a measured and future-focused approach, noting that interoperability standards were not agreed by digital and data ministers until February this year. Rather than rushing to implement a

standalone solution, this work will ensure the ACT's digital driver licence is secure, trusted and accepted across Australia. The discovery work will also explore how digital credentials could work alongside existing ways of accessing government services and how the technology developed for a digital driver licence will potentially support other forms of digital identity in the future.

The budget also continues the development of a whole-of-government enterprise resource planning solution. This investment supports the planning and development of systems that underpin core government functions by standardising business processes and improving data quality and the information that supports decision-making. By making it easier to manage and connect core business processes, this project will support the ACT public service to focus on the work that matters most in delivering services for our community.

This budget's commitment to digital transformation is not simply about technology; it is about delivering modern, secure, responsive services focused on the people we all represent. Our government's investments will strengthen the digital foundations of government, modernise the systems that support our workforce and improve the way Canberrans access services. The 2026-27 budget makes practical investments in the future of the ACT public service and ultimately in better outcomes for the Canberra community.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the staff of Digital Canberra—an agency that has only existed for just over a year. In particular, I pay tribute to the interim director-general Bettina Konti, who did a power of work to establish the directorate before her retirement earlier this year. The transition of digital capabilities from other directorates into Digital Canberra is continuing, and I thank all of our public service leaders and staff who are supporting this complex work. Digital Canberra staff work behind the scenes. Their work is not visible until something goes wrong, but our services rely on them every day, 24 hours a day. They might not be frontline staff, but the front line would grind to a halt without them. It is a privilege to serve as their minister and get some insight into their complex work.

In closing this evening, in the interests of time I will take the opportunity now to put on my finance hat and thank everyone involved in putting together the 26-27 budget. I am sure the Treasurer will do this more thoroughly in closing the debate, so I will just say thank you sincerely to every public servant, especially those in Treasury, who has enabled the delivery of another budget that delivers for all Canberrans.

Finally, thank you to all the staff across level 2 who have supported us to get to the point of passing the appropriation bills for 2026-27—fingers crossed—and in particular my own staff, especially Kahlia and Ben, and those in the Treasurer's and Chief Minister's office and the office of the former Deputy Chief Minister, who played a key role through the ERC process. I commend the 26-27 budget appropriation bills to the Assembly.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Canberra Institute of Technology—Part 1.11

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (9.12): I will speak briefly and quickly in response to this year's budget for CIT. Not long after this budget was first handed down—though, importantly, after CIT officials had appeared at estimates hearings—we heard that CIT was offering voluntary redundancies to staff due to budget pressures. At the time we called for transparency around the redundancies and called out CIT executives for painting a rosy picture about enrolments during estimates when the figures and announcements begged to differ. I was glad to then get public confirmation from the CIT that there would be no compulsory job losses. I hope that provided the CIT community with some reassurance after what had been an extremely tumultuous year for them. We are now in a position where CIT governance is being fully explored through a committee inquiry, and the possibility of a UC-CIT merger is being discussed. In some ways I think the CIT are a little bit of a “watch this space” right now.

I do want to take the opportunity to make clear the ACT Greens' position on what the government must do to ensure CIT is a place where teachers can focus on teaching and students on learning and growing. We need to value it, and we must fund it properly. As CIT reduces their budget by 10 per cent in pursuit of fiscal sustainability, there need to be assurances that these savings will not come at the cost of students' education or experience at CIT.

Since last year's budget we have received significant constituent concerns about the removal of the CIT's remedial massage course and the ATAR languages program, as well as other courses being cut without clear reasons for their removal being provided to the CIT community and industry stakeholders. When CIT is being asked to plan significant savings, we need to know that courses and educational opportunities are not simply disappearing as a consequence. Every time a course is taken away we need to consider what opportunity, pathways and community goes along with it. CIT is a public institution, and we must make decisions that allow its community—and indeed Canberra—to take pride in it.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (9.14): I rise to speak about CIT, because what has happened at and to CIT over recent years is a pretty clear example of how failures in this government eventually catch up with the institutions that we all know and love. CIT should be one of Canberra's strongest public institutions. It should be the place where young people learn a trade, workers retrain, apprentices gain qualifications and employees find the skilled people that they need. That is the idea behind CIT, but instead years of governance failures, procurement scandals and financial pressures have left CIT in a position where it is trying to cut its way back to stability.

Operation Luna should have been a turning point. The Integrity Commission examined a contract worth around \$8.8 million and made findings of serious corrupt conduct involving former CIT officials. I think it is easy to forget sometimes that Operation Kingfisher was not the first example of serious corrupt conduct in Canberra's public institutions. Operation Luna revealed that there was public money which should have gone into teaching, equipment, apprentices and students, but instead millions were tied up in consultancy arrangements that became the subject of years of investigation, legal scrutiny and reputational damage. The cost of that failure goes well beyond the contracts themselves. It has damaged confidence in the institution, it has consumed management time, it has weakened morale and made every later financial decision harder. Now CIT is under real budget pressure, and the people being asked to carry the

burden are the staff and students who had nothing to do with those failures.

CIT recorded an operating deficit of around \$28 million for the year ending December 2025. That is around \$7 million worse than the year before. In response CIT has opened voluntary redundancies, deferred hiring, reviewed contract renewals and begun considering a broader restructure. I find this really hard to accept. The institution has spent years dealing with the consequences of poor governance and questionable procurement, and now the answer seems to be to reduce staff, slow recruitment, place more pressure on the people actually delivering training and even hollow out the offerings. We have to ask: how is it that we reach the position where Canberra's public training provider is offering redundancies, tightening staffing, with finances deteriorating so badly?

The government cannot take credit for ribbon cuttings and then distance itself from the consequences of finances falling apart. It has responsibility for CIT. It has that responsibility through the highs and the lows. The government remains responsible for the lows. It appoints the ministers. Then the ministers received the warnings, watched the governance failures unfold and watched the financial position worsen, and still they claim that there is nothing that they can do. There is a real risk now that the response is beginning to damage the core purpose of the institution. When experienced teachers leave, that capability is not easily replaced. When hiring is frozen, specialist courses become harder to sustain. When staff are stretched, students feel it through fewer options, less flexibility and weaker support.

I was at the opening of the Woden CIT building, and the hope and ambition that was in that building, exhibited by those who were there to learn and those who were there to teach, was incredible. More and more what I hear is about people giving up. They do not feel like they are being supported. CIT is not just some other agency where positions can be shuffled around on an organisational chart with no consequence. Its value sits in its people—its people with technical knowledge, industry experience and the ability to convey that experience and uplift the next generation who are learning. That is especially important because Canberra already faces serious skills shortages. Construction needs workers, allied health needs workers, hospitality needs workers, clean energy needs workers, but the institution that should be helping solve those shortages has been weakened by years of poor governance and financial pressure.

That is why integrity and financial sustainability cannot be treated as separate or niche issues. Bad governance costs money, poor procurement costs money, corruption costs money and weak oversight costs money. All these costs build up, but the payment and the real cost is in the futures that our students at CIT and indeed our economy and employers could see if we had a strong CIT. Too often it is not the people who make the bad decisions, as I said. It is the staff whose jobs become uncertain, the student whose options narrow and the taxpayers who fund the cleaner.

We have seen that pattern elsewhere. I mentioned Operation Kingfisher. Operation Kingfisher exposed serious failures in procurement around the Campbell Primary School project. The Assembly had to establish inquiries into financial management and procurement compliance. These incidents are not harmless. They are not isolated. There is a clear pattern, and that pattern erodes trust and imposes real costs, both tangible and intangible, on all Canberrans.

CIT needs stability, it needs strong governance and it needs financial discipline, and it needs a government willing to accept responsibility for what has happened under its watch. CIT is a beloved institution in Canberra, but the government seems to have abandoned it. Canberra needs a strong public training provider—our students need it, our apprentices need it, our businesses need it. But the government seems to just walk away. It is all hands-off. The minister seems to be consistently saying there is nothing that he can do, that all the power rests with the board, but the opportunities are there should the minister wish to bring changes to those governance arrangements.

CIT will require more than just another restructure or another management statement. I do not accept that we have to depend on the University of Canberra to rescue it. It requires the government to confront how the institution ended up where it is and stop pretending that integrity failures and financial failures are separate problems and stop pretending that it is all someone else's fault. They are all part of the same story, and CIT, its staff and its students are paying the price.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (9.22): The long-term sustainability of CIT should be a matter of concern for this Assembly. CIT is our public provider of vocational education and training, although it provides a very small per cent of the VET sector compared to the RTOs that are in the industry, in the sector. CIT plays a critical role in developing the workforce that supports our economy, our health system, our construction industry and many essential services, but the figures in the annual report raise serious questions about the institute's future direction.

The annual report says:

CIT's low liquidity ratio further highlights the financial pressure facing the organisation, underscoring the urgent need to review the operating model and profile planning activities to work towards restoring financial sustainability.

Over the past five years, subject enrolments have fallen significantly; from more than \$111,000 in 2021 to around \$80,000 in 2025. While some of this decline can be attributed to the strong labour market and post-COVID changes in training demand, it nevertheless represents a substantial reduction in student activity. The question for the government is whether this is a temporary fluctuation or evidence of a longer term structural challenge for CIT.

Student numbers matter because they underpin both CIT's educational impact and its financial sustainability. Fewer students means less revenue, pressure on course delivery and difficult decisions about future investment.

The board itself has recognised these challenges, establishing a strategic business growth committee and pursuing a future growth strategy. CIT has also closed CIT Solutions, following concerns about its long-term financial sustainability. These are clear signs that maintaining a sustainable financial position remains a significant issue for the organisation. We can also see it in the student numbers at Woden CIT where it was said many times that there will be 6,500 students there. A question on notice I did said there are 2,500 students.

So, the Assembly should therefore ask whether the current business model is sustainable, whether CIT is attracting students in growth industries, and whether the government and the board have a clear plan to reverse the decline in enrolments.

The success of CIT should not be measured simply by new buildings or governance reforms. It should be measured by growing student participation, delivering skills for the future and ensuring the institute remains financially strong for generations to come.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (7.56): I sincerely hope that this new financial year signals a change for the better for the Canberra Institute of Technology. As members know, I welcomed Dr McNeill's departure from the role of CEO last month, which followed months of turmoil at the ACT's public vocational education institution: multiple investigations; a finding of misconduct at TAFE NSW that no one knew about; a finding from our own public accounts and administration committee that Dr McNeill actively misled the board; concerns raised by the privileges committee that her conduct was inconsistent with public sector values, and undermined the integrity and reputation of the service; concerns raised by the minister himself of reputational damage being caused to CIT; and a referral for further investigation by the Public Sector Standards Commissioner.

This, of course, is all in the context of Dr McNeill's predecessor, Leanne Cover, having herself been found to have engaged in serious corrupt conduct during her time as CIT's CEO, which also involved years of turmoil and reputational damage to the institution. In addition to the undeniable reputational damage incurred under Dr McNeill's stewardship and the disruption for staff and students, this all of course has budget implications, which is what we are here to speak about today.

We know that Ms Cover collected \$1.2 million in total remuneration whilst stood down for almost two years on paid leave, and thereafter with her payout—while under investigation for the \$8.5 million worth of contracts she had awarded to the complexity thinker, who himself was ultimately awarded \$2.4 million plus legal costs in compensation for non-completion of the contract. If only we had learned from that experience.

In strangely familiar fashion, after only 13 months in the job, Dr McNeill went on paid leave for a couple of months and was then paid out \$445,000 when she stood down from the role, following all these allegations and investigations into her conduct. No one has yet explained in detail why she was given this payout after having supposedly resigned. We raised this during the estimates process and in the estimates committee report.

I know, though, from the influx of correspondence from CIT staff in relation to this matter, that this payout was insulting for many of the much lower-paid staff who have worked at CIT for many years—sometimes over 20 years—who have never been subject to misconduct investigations or underperformance allegations, and who will not be offered anything close to \$445,000 under the voluntary redundancy scheme that is currently unfolding at CIT. One staff member wrote to me to say:

From my perspective, an interstate executive was brought into our public training organisation, stayed for a relatively short period, turned the place upside down,

spent her time holding meetings that staff struggled to see the value in, caused fractures between staff, did not action numerous complaints about other senior executives, failed to put a stop to internal bullying, and is now reportedly walking away with a lotto win. The message this sends to staff is incredibly damaging.

I have given CIT a huge part of my working life. I have fought hard for the organisation, our staff and the students we serve, but I have reached a point where I feel completely defeated by what I am seeing.

Unsurprisingly, the problems at CIT have extended far beyond the recruitment of its most senior executive. Other members have touched on this. This year, a popular seniors' fitness program at CIT was cut from 20 classes per week to 12. CIT almost doubled the cost of its remedial massage course after pausing it for 18 months, despite remedial massage being on the ACT skills needs list. CIT has also scrapped a critical ATAR-level languages program that was only costing \$124,000 to deliver.

At the same time, 39 senior staff were flown to attend a conference in Brisbane earlier this year, at a cost of almost \$100,000. From 2015 to 2025, CIT's expenses grew by 38 per cent, while course enrolments dropped by 40 per cent. The teaching workforce was reduced by 68 positions, while the senior and executive management workforce more than doubled.

Another recent letter from a coalition of CIT staff said:

The board's recent statement to the media about Dr McNeill's tenure at CIT is extraordinary. The board stated, "Dr McNeill led CIT over the last 13 months, bringing considerable expertise and energy to the role, and introduced significant changes to CIT's operations, including reductions in executive staffing and increased staff communications."

The letter goes on to say:

This is not merely a generous assessment of a former chief executive. It is a deeply misleading account of what occurred at CIT and an insult to the intelligence and lived experience of staff and students.

The claim that Dr McNeil introduced significant changes through reductions in executive staffing is disingenuous. The executive was reduced by one position, net. One. There are still 11 executives, and one of those positions has been upgraded to a deputy CEO. That hardly constitutes the transformation organisational achievement the board's statement seeks to imply. There were only four executives five years ago.

This letter was also provided to the CIT board, by the way. So, I look forward to seeing what action it takes to address these concerns.

This trend toward top-heavy staffing that protects the interests of senior executives while deprioritising the core teaching and administrative workforce, and often ignoring their concerns—based on the accounts I have heard from staff—followed governance changes in 2015 which meant the CEO reported to an independent board rather than to the minister or, say, to the Assembly.

The minister responsible for this budget area seems to have largely watched on as this all unfolded, with his jaw on the floor like the rest of us; flying blind while the plane cranes towards catastrophe with millions of dollars of our money, taxpayers' money, being wasted along the way.

This reduced ministerial accountability has hamstrung parliamentary scrutiny as well, and it clearly has not worked. I have welcomed the government's commitment to review governance arrangements at CIT and note the Standing Committee on Economics Industry and Recreation has also announced an inquiry into potential governance reforms for CIT.

We need to address these issues, learn from the past, start listening to staff with boots on the ground, and refocus expenditure at CIT on supporting dedicated staff at a deeply valued public educational education and training institution, to provide the best possible experience and outcomes for students.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business and Industry, Minister for Arts, Creative Industries and the Night-Time Economy, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (9.32): I would like to thank all members for their contributions on CIT. I understand that members in this place are deeply passionate about vocational education and want to see the public provider here in the ACT succeed.

I would like to emphasise that many of the contributions made this evening have focused on some of the more damaging moments in CIT's recent history, and I do not seek for this debate to be simply about the past. I would offer to all members who are expressing interest in vocational education, and particularly in CIT, an opportunity to engage with CIT in more positive means.

Mr Cocks made reference to attending the opening of CIT Woden. If that is the last time he has been at CIT since, I would love to facilitate an opportunity for him to engage with staff and students at another opportunity. Because each and every day, the students and staff of CIT are doing fantastic things throughout the range of distractions and unfortunate circumstances that have been so detrimental to CIT's reputation.

The work of staff and the learning of students has gone on. And they do fantastic things. And they are doing a fantastic job of representing the ACT—overseas, in this current moment, at WorldSkills. I am very hopeful that there are going to be great results for the young Canberrans that are currently representing the ACT on the other side of the planet. So, CIT remains a fantastic place to get a vocational education.

Ms Carrick made reference to the percentage of training being undertaken at CIT versus private RTOs. I am not sure I would accept that characterisation of the breakdown. I think it relies very heavily on short courses that are not receiving government funding. CIT is the dominant provider of substantive vocational education in this city. They do a fantastic job of it.

Central to, I think, a lot of the discourse that has centred on CIT in recent years are the high expectations—rightly high expectations—that people have of CIT based on its track record of strong delivery. Industry wants CIT to provide courses because they

provide a higher quality of course at a cheaper price than private industry. Now, that is a good thing.

To be very clear, Mr Deputy Speaker, and for the benefit of all members in this chamber, to do so requires the ongoing support of the ACT taxpayer. Now that is something that this side of the chamber is very proud to do. We here, in the ACT Labor government, support public vocational education—which is why we continue to increase our investment in it, and which is why we support things like free TAFE which is not a political position that is supported across the political spectrum, Mr Deputy Speaker.

So, we will continue to support vocational education. We will support public TAFE. And if people want CIT to continue to succeed, which I largely accept people in this chamber do, that will require ongoing political support. And that is undermined somewhat by those who cannot update their talking points from a handful of years ago and see what good work is happening right now at CIT, based on a joint commitment from the commonwealth government and the ACT government under the National Skills Agreement which is a landmark partnership between all of the states and territories and the commonwealth.

It reflects a shared commitment to boost productivity and it supports Canberrans to improve their lives through skills and training; and it puts public TAFE, like CIT, at the very heart of the VET system.

Now, a key initiative under the National Skills Agreement is Australia's first EV TAFE Centre of Excellence, established right here in Canberra at CIT. This budget includes \$16 million in capital funding and \$2.592 million in operational funding to continue this important initiative.

Unfortunately, a lot of the conversation about the EV Centre of Excellence has not actually focused on the tremendous work they do. The EV Centre of Excellence is remarkably popular. It is travelling around the country, putting on showcases, providing training, developing new qualifications, and it is a tremendous success story that we should be proud of for the ACT. This is what vocational education needs to transition into, and we are pioneering it here in the ACT.

That funding will enable ongoing training, workforce development, and the infrastructure upgrades that are needed. Now, CIT has already achieved 10 out of the 11 existing project milestones, including automotive workforce upskilling, the EV training roadshow, upskilling educators, establishing a national TAFE working group, hosting research events, and developing new qualifications such as Electric Forklift Training and First Responder EV Awareness.

This budget also supports the delivery of new milestones, including an electric vehicle higher apprenticeship, a schools engagement program, and pilot programs for priority cohorts—all aimed at growing the pipeline of skilled workers to meet national and ACT workforce priorities.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we are continuing to focus on operationalising the CIT Woden campus, the Youth Foyer and the standalone CIT Yurauna. We are investing to make

sure these facilities are fully equipped to deliver high-quality education and support services to students and the wider community.

The 2026-27 budget provides one-year funding of \$5.878 million in expenditure funding, partially offset by existing expenditure funding from the CIT Reid campus of \$1.9 million and own-source revenue from facilities activation of \$346,000.

This investment will maintain the six-star Green Star rating at the Woden campus. We know that Canberrans are committed to net zero. We know Canberrans are investing their own money in making their homes and businesses greener, cleaner and more sustainable. And they rightly expect every part of their government to do the same, and CIT is no exception.

We are also integrating advanced technologies and smart campus features at Woden campus. This means things like digital learning environments, enhanced connectivity, and innovative building management systems. Because our CIT students and teachers deserve a state-of-the-art, modern, flexible and safe learning experience.

The Youth Foyer at Woden will ensure tailored support for young people at risk of homelessness, connecting them with education, training and wraparound services in a purpose-built, energy-efficient facility.

The new standalone CIT Yurauna campus will continue to play a vital role in providing culturally safe learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, supported by state-of-the-art infrastructure and a strong focus on sustainability.

Mr Deputy Speaker, these investments are part of the ACT government's ongoing commitment to delivering future-focused, inclusive and sustainable vocational education. And I commend the appropriation to the Assembly.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Canberra Health Services—Part 1.12

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

City Renewal Authority—Part 1.13

MRS MORRIS (Brindabella) (9.40): Canberrans should feel safe taking their children in to Civic, meeting friends for dinner or using public transport. Someone finishing a late shift should be able to get home safely. A chef or a baker starting in the early hours should be able to get to work without being threatened or harassed. These are very reasonable expectations of our city centre, and the government has a responsibility to meet them.

Our cafes, restaurants, pubs and nightclubs give people reasons to come to the city and spend time there. The Greens are fond of talking about third places, where people can gather outside home and work. But that does not just apply to libraries; some of those places serve beer. Behind these businesses are owners who have invested their savings, and staff who depend on their next shift. They provide places to meet friends, celebrate

a birthday or unwind after work. Their success matters to Canberra.

However, antisocial behaviour is undermining the enjoyment of our public spaces, while construction disruption is making parking and access harder. These problems have real consequences for businesses trying to attract customers. Across 22 days of observation between December 2024 and February 2025, an audit recorded 612 incidents of antisocial behaviour in Civic. In about half of the observed cases, people left or avoided areas because of that behaviour. In fact, one member of the auditing team had to be withdrawn after receiving threats.

This was an observational study of known problem locations conducted between eight in the morning and eight at night. These findings involve places that families use during the day, as well as in the evening. The report also described events being closed early and increased spending on security. When people leave, nearby businesses can lose customers. Ratepayers also lose some of the benefit of the events that they have helped to fund.

The authority says it has since undertaken lighting and safety improvements, and worked with police and community services, and that work is welcome. Lighting and camera surveillance have their role, but common sense tells us that we need regular, visible police patrols and a timely response when people are threatened. People struggling with addiction or mental ill-health need access to help. The government must ensure those services work together so that problems are addressed before more people are harmed.

Business owners also deserve a government that understands the cost of keeping their doors open. Labor controls the fees that it charges and the approval processes that businesses must navigate. Those opposite need to take responsibility for the burden that their decisions place on local employers. Commercial properties in the city and parts of Braddon already attract the City Centre Marketing and Improvements Levy. It helps to fund events, improvements, cleaning and security. The government must demonstrate what that money is delivering for businesses and the customers who use these streets.

Business owners told the Assembly's night-time economy inquiry that high liquor licence fees, fragmented regulation and construction disruption are making trading harder. These are operators with direct experience of trying to keep Canberra's nightlife going, and the government should take their concerns seriously.

The authority also needs to work closely with businesses affected by city construction. Liquor licence reductions and outdoor dining fee waivers for affected businesses are welcome, but who wants to sit outside for dinner on a Friday evening with machinery blaring 20 metres away, or to stop for lunch, only to be subjected to shouting and abuse? Customers deserve to enjoy a meal in peace. That means having a considered and appropriate response to antisocial behaviour in the CBD. We need to plan our public works better, so that we are not disrupting peak trade without good reason. Businesses need reliable notice, clear access for customers and someone who can resolve problems when they arise.

A successful night-time economy gives Canberrans more opportunities to enjoy their city. It supports hospitality workers and gives visitors a reason to stay longer and talk

up Canberra when they go home. That requires businesses that can afford to trade and customers who feel confident to come in.

I acknowledge the work of the City Renewal Authority in trying to make the CBD a better place, but their work is being undermined by a government with its head in the sand and failing to get community safety right. Canberrans deserve to feel safe in their city, and businesses deserve a chance to succeed. The government is actively undermining both.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (9.46): I rise to speak on the 2026-27 budget and the performance of the City Renewal Authority. The City Renewal Authority plays an important role in shaping Canberra's city centre and inner north. It is responsible for reviewing public spaces, delivering infrastructure, supporting economic activity, and creating attractive places for people to live, work and visit.

This budget raises important questions about delivery, financial sustainability and accountability. The authority reported a deficit in 2024-25, after major land sales failed to proceed as planned. This highlights a significant risk in the authority's business model. Too much of its financial position depends on a small number of major transactions and development projects. When those projects are delayed, revenue falls and the territory is left exposed.

At the same time, the authority is embarking on an increasingly ambitious capital works program, including the Acton waterfront, the City Spine and upgrades across the city centre and Dickson. These are substantial investments of public money. The community deserves confidence that projects will be delivered on time, on budget and with clear public benefit.

The government frequently points to place-making activities, festivals and city activations as evidence of success. While these initiatives can contribute to a vibrant city, taxpayers are entitled to ask: what measurable outcomes are being achieved? Are businesses seeing increased activity? Are vacancy rates falling? Are these investments delivering lasting economic benefits and attracting private investment? Most importantly, where is the evaluation? The government is quick to announce spending, but too often it is reluctant to rigorously assess whether that spending has achieved its objectives.

Before committing more funding, the Assembly should have confidence that the authority can demonstrate clear economic, social and community outcomes from its work. Budgets should be a reminder that city renewal is not simply about building infrastructure or hosting events; it is about delivering measurable improvements for residents, business and visitors, while ensuring public funds are spent wisely. The government must strengthen evaluation, improve transparency around project delivery and demonstrate that the significant investments being made through the City Renewal Authority are achieving the outcomes that Canberrans have been promised.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Cultural Facilities Corporation—Part 1.14

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (9.49): I want to note concerns about the Treasurer's advance that was made for the Canberra Theatre. I understand it is for underwriting ticket sales that were lower than expected. It is a fairly significant sum. It is \$700,000, which, as a proportion of the Canberra Theatre's recurrent operating expenses, is a pretty large proportion.

I am concerned for a few reasons. I am concerned about the magnitude. I am concerned about the fact that this information came out after budget estimates and that all the budget scrutiny had occurred. I asked a question about it in question time today, but I do not have any information about this at all. I did not really have an opportunity to find out about it.

I am concerned that, while the government is underwriting poor ticket sales for the theatre that we have, the government is also busy spending \$300 million to build another theatre. I am now wondering whether the government has done its homework to make sure we will not now be simply underwriting low ticket sales in both theatres. Again, these are questions that I would love to have asked during budget estimates, if the information had been out at the time.

MR PETTERSSON (Yerrabi—Minister for Business and Industry, Minister for Arts, Creative Industries and the Night-Time Economy, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations) (9.50): I am pleased to speak in support of the 2026-27 budget and the government's continued investment in Canberra's arts, heritage and cultural life.

This budget recognises that arts and culture are central to Canberra's identity as a vibrant, creative and connected city, enriching communities, supporting wellbeing, attracting visitors and contributing significantly to our economy. That is why this government continues to invest in the cultural infrastructure, collections, heritage places and creative experiences that make Canberra such an exceptional place to live, work and visit.

A key feature of this budget is an investment of \$19.815 million over four years to support the Cultural Facilities Corporation to prepare for and operate Canberra's new 2,000-seat lyric theatre ahead of its 2028 opening. This is a major investment in Canberra's future.

The lyric theatre will transform our cultural landscape, expanding opportunities for audiences, artists and the broader community, and strengthening Canberra's position on the national touring circuit. This funding is not just about a new building; it will support the workforce, systems and planning needed to operate a venue of this scale, while ensuring that the Canberra Theatre Centre continues delivering high-quality performances across its existing venues. We are laying the foundations now for strong programming, audiences and community engagement from day one.

Culture is both a social and economic asset. Every major production brings people in to the city, supports local businesses and strengthens Canberra's reputation as a dynamic capital. The lyric theatre will help to revitalise Civic and the night-time economy, support employment across creative industries, technical production, tourism and hospitality, and create training and career pathways for the next generation of

Canberrans.

Alongside preparing for the lyric theatre, this budget commits a further \$13 million over three years to maintain and enhance our existing theatre venues, including upgrades to seating, carpeting and sound systems at the Playhouse. This complements other works already underway at the Canberra Theatre Centre, including roof upgrades, Courtyard Studio improvements and terrace activation, ensuring our performing arts infrastructure remains strong and modern.

The government's commitment extends beyond the performing arts. This budget continues investing in Canberra's visual arts, collections and heritage places. We are progressing our commitment to grow the Canberra Museum and Gallery collection and establish a permanent digital exhibition space at Lanyon Homestead, expanding access to Canberra's stories and cultural heritage.

The government also continues investing in the conservation and accessibility of significant heritage places. At Lanyon Homestead, works are underway to improve the main driveway, enhance staff facilities and conserve the historic Shearers Precinct. Conservation works at Mugga Mugga Cottage are stabilising historic buildings, restoring landscape and gardens, and preserving important collections. Heritage restoration at Albert Hall is progressing, and is expected to be completed in early 2027, ensuring that this civic landmark can continue serving performances, exhibitions and community gatherings.

The 2026-27 budget reflects our commitment to investing in the infrastructure, institutions and cultural experiences that enrich Canberrans' lives and support our growing city. From the new lyric theatre to maintaining existing venues, growing our collections and conserving heritage places, this budget lays the foundations for a stronger cultural future—an investment in creativity, community, economic growth and Canberra's identity as a vibrant capital.

I commend the Appropriation Bill 2026-2027 to the Assembly.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Legal Aid Commission (ACT)—Part 1.15

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (9.55): I am pleased to share these thoughts of the shadow attorney-general, Ms Chiaka Barry, on the Legal Aid Commission appropriation:

I have spoken a lot about the principles of justice at different points in this place, and particularly in the context of this budget. There are, unfortunately, too many places where we are seeing the government getting the balance wrong. One of those areas concerns the budget allocation for the Legal Aid Commission.

The Legal Aid Commission is a critical pioneer when it comes to access to justice and fairness in the justice system for many Canberrans, and especially for defendants. The vast majority of their clients are people accused of crime. In order to qualify for legal assistance, these people essentially must be of low socio-economic status.

As a result, the missing middle is continually overlooked and left in an equally difficult predicament in terms of their access to justice. They earn too much to qualify for legal assistance, but not enough to afford private legal representation at the going hourly rate, and the other increasing costs of legal proceedings.

In estimates hearings, we heard evidence from the Legal Aid Commission of their service delivery targets to provide services to clients with an income equivalent to 120 per cent of the poverty line. In other words, that would be to provide services to clients who earn up to approximately \$570 a week. However, the CEO noted that the funding shortfalls make it impossible for Legal Aid to do that. This leads to what he has described as the missing middle continually being left out. It means that the service delivery benchmark targets, which should be increasing, cannot do so because the current target cannot be met.

That is a problem. Indeed, it is about a \$4 million problem. As the CEO articulated, the funding is completely inadequate to secure current service requirements. The Legal Aid Commission is facing a funding cliff which amounts to the equivalent of 15 staff members and about a thousand grants of legal assistance. Charge-out rates for their lawyers have not increased at all in line with inflation, which is totally unfair to a hardworking and committed profession who do an extraordinarily difficult job.

This cannot be considered in isolation. It must be considered alongside the budget allocation for the Director of Public Prosecutions. Indeed, it is in the interest of all Canberrans to have a well-funded DPP, but it is also in the interest of all Canberrans to have a comparatively funded Legal Aid Commission. It is a matter of fairness, equality and access to justice.

Anyone who has been to the Magistrates Court has seen the Legal Aid duty lawyer completely flat out at work, with an endless list of accused people who have no legal representation. That causes delays in proceedings and leads to an excessive amount of adjourned proceedings. Much of this could be alleviated if Legal Aid were appropriately funded.

While I welcome the government's noted intention to review the financial sustainability of Legal Aid, with the aim of encouraging long-term viability, this \$150,000 study is only meaningful if it actually results in adequate changes, because the direction is completely unsustainable. The current budget has increased funding for the DPP while underfunding Legal Aid. In other words, it pits defendants against a well-armed prosecution.

The CEO of the Legal Aid Commission noted as much in estimates hearings, when he indicated that a similar funding match with the DPP is necessary. It is a point that goes to the fact that their workloads are comparable, and parties to criminal proceedings should be on a mostly equal footing to ensure fairness and take some of the mounting pressure off courts that is associated with the increase in the number of self-represented litigants. Unfortunately, it is a sentiment that is not reflected in this year's budget.

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (10.00 pm): I rise to make some brief comments in relation to the budget investment in Legal Aid and complement the comments just made. I spoke earlier today about a welcome investment into the DPP, but in budget

estimates we heard very concerning evidence from the CEO of the Legal Aid Commission regarding the impact of a budget that is not going to touch the sides in relation to providing access to justice for some of our most vulnerable community members.

Not having enough money to get legal aid or to be able to get any legal assistance means that people sometimes do not even bother to try to access the legal system. It can mean that people represent themselves, creating significant challenges in navigating the legal system and creating delays and difficulties for the courts as people try to work their way through the system. We have heard, particularly, of the issues with regard to rationing legal aid, which is seeing people who need support just not getting it.

We have heard that there is currently an auditing process going on, and this is supposed to provide the foundation for future investments in this area. We note the urgency of this work and hope that this will result in an adequate investment into a vital service that creates fairness and equity in the legal system.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Office of the Work Health and Safety Commissioner—Part 1.1

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (10.02): I rise today to speak of the Office of Work Health and Safety Commissioner because there is a principle that should sit above politics here: every worker who goes to work should come home safely, whoever they are, wherever they work and whatever time of day. That is the standard Canberrans expect to be upheld, whether you work on a construction site, in an office, behind the wheel, in a hospital or in a small family business.

The ACT already has a substantial work health and safety framework. WorkSafe ACT is responsible for enforcing those laws, and the obligations on employers are extensive. Businesses are required to identify hazards, assess risks, control them, review those controls and support workers when something goes wrong. A good workplace safety system cannot simply be measured by how many rules are written, how many notices are issued or how much power a regulator has. The real measure is whether fewer people are being hurt, both physically and psychosocially; whether risks are being identified before someone else ends up in hospital or is unable to continue working; whether employees understand what they need to do and can get practical help to do it; and whether workers have confidence that the system is actually focused on keeping them safe and will be there when they need it.

I have spoken before about how important it is for WorkSafe ACT to be firm where it needs to be firm. Good employers do not cut corners, ignore warnings or put workers at unacceptable risk, and a regulator must have the power and willingness to act if they do. But enforcement cannot be the beginning and end of workplace safety. A regulator that only turns up after something goes wrong is not delivering the best possible system.

And context matters, especially where employers are, as is the case for the majority, of good intention and trying to do their best for their employees and for their customers. A large company might have a work health safety team, lawyers, human resources staff and special advisors; a small business owner might have five employees, be doing the

payroll at night and trying to interpret a new safety requirement in between serving customers and keeping the doors open. The law and the system should expect both to keep their workers safe, and it should help employers to meet their obligations. A government cannot pretend that all businesses have the same resources. Employers need engagement, not malicious compliance, and the government needs to listen to both workers and employers.

There is also a serious concern about the government's broader approach to work health and safety that I have flagged briefly previously, and that is the relationship with the Secure Local Jobs Code—the so-called “Secure Local Jobs Code”. The government has been describing this code as a mechanism for ensuring businesses meet work health and safety standards, but the fundamental problem is that this code is not a substitute for the workplace safety system, and it does not connect with it.

A procurement box being ticked is not workplace safety, just as attaching another layer of bureaucracy to government contracts does not mean a worker is any safer when they step onto a work site. The government spent years building an elaborate procurement regime around this code, while the actual work of workplace safety sits with WorkSafe ACT, with employers, with workers and with practical systems operating at each workplace.

The government's pre-qualification process treats Secure Local Jobs Code certification and work health and safety performance as separate matters. WHS records, WorkSafe history and safety performance are considered separately from holding a SLJC certificate. There is no connection, and I continue to be astounded that there is no formal role in a system the government tells us is about workplace safety—that in that system, there is no role for the workplace regulator. You can create as many codes, certificates and procurement processes as you like, but none of them replace the basic task of making the workplace safer.

Mr Speaker, I am concerned that this government too often confuses industrial relations policy with workplace safety. They are not the same thing. A worker does not become safer simply because their employer has completed another procurement audit. A worker does not become safer because their employer has a union-endorsed enterprise bargaining agreement. A fall from a height is not prevented by a certificate hanging on a wall. Silica exposure is not controlled by another form sent to government. Those risks are controlled through proper systems of work, training, supervision, safe equipment and people on the ground understanding what can hurt them and how to stop it.

WorkSafe's guidance reflects exactly that practical approach. Its focus on managing identifiable risks such as falls, hazardous chemicals, plants, silica, workplace environment and psychosocial risks is where the emphasis needs to actually be, and it is where it should remain.

We should all be able to expect an Office of Work Health and Safety that businesses and workers both respect and trust. That means a regulator prepared to take action on genuinely reckless behaviour, and it means one that is prepared to pick up the phone and help a business understand how to comply.

The Canberra Liberals will always support workplace safety. I have said it before: every worker should be able to expect to return home at the end of their shift in the same condition that they arrived. Every family should be able to expect their loved ones to return home. But we should also expect government policy to be designed around achieving that outcome rather than just creating another process.

The SLJC does not do the job of WorkSafe ACT, and it should never be allowed to distract from it. Workplace safety has to be more than a procurement slogan. It deserves the focus of a regulator relentlessly preventing injuries, supporting safe workplaces and acting when people are placed at risk.

It is what workers deserve. It is what responsible employers deserve, and it is what the government should deliver.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

ACT Executive—Part 1.17

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

ICON Water Limited—Part 1.18

MR BRADDOCK (Yerrabi) (10.10): Publicly-owned utilities play a critical role in the daily lives of Canberrans. Every household and business relies on the services provided by ICON Water and Evoenergy, and the decisions taken today will have consequences that last for decades.

As we consider this budget, we must ensure these utilities continue to deliver affordable, reliable services, while supporting the ACT's transition to a zero emissions future. While the ACT has been successful moving to 100 per cent renewable energy, one of our biggest challenges is managing our transition off the fossil gas network. This means we must manage what happens to the gas network itself.

For decades, households and businesses have paid for the construction and maintenance of an extensive gas network across our city. As more people switch to efficient electric appliances, fewer customers will remain connected to that network. People are keen to get off gas. They know the benefits of a cheaper, cleaner electrified future.

However, the costs of operating the gas network do not disappear because fewer people are using it. The Greens have been raising the alarm about a vicious cycle: people who can afford to electrify leave the network first; the cost of maintaining the network is then spread across a smaller customer base; there is an increase for those who remain connected, encouraging even more people to leave.

We know who may be left behind: renters, apartment residents, low-income households, small businesses and people living in homes that require expensive electrical upgrades may have the least ability to transition. Without careful planning, those with the least capacity to make the switch could end up carrying the greatest burden. Both the ACT government's energy transition work and Evoenergy's own regulatory discussions have highlighted the importance of avoiding that outcome. There

are so many opportunities to make the next phase of our city's energy transition equitable.

There is also the question of stranded assets. Gas pipes and associated infrastructure were built on the expectation they would operate for many decades. If parts of that network are retired early, someone will have to pay for the remaining value of those assets. We do not have a clear answer as to whether those costs will fall on the remaining gas customers, taxpayers or some combination of the two. The question is no longer whether gas demand will decline; the question is whether we manage that decline fairly, transparently and at the lowest possible cost to the community.

At the same time as we move away from fossil gas, the energy transition is creating new demands on our electricity network. Every household that electrifies places additional demand on the grid. That is generally a positive development that leads to lower energy bills and reduced emissions, but it means Evoenergy must ensure the electricity network is ready. As more households replace gas heating and hot water systems with electric alternatives, particularly during Canberra's cold winters, we will need sufficient investment in substations, transformers and local network capacity.

During estimates hearings, Evoenergy was questioned extensively about whether the network is prepared for the combined impact of electrification, electric vehicle uptake, population growth and urban infill. Evoenergy advised that its demand forecasts explicitly account for those factors and inform a long-term development plan extending to 2045. We heard that funding approved for the current regulatory period through to 2029 is sufficient to meet the forecast demand, and they pointed to investments such as the new Molonglo zone substation and feeder upgrades to support growing communities.

Those assurances are welcome, but the concerns remain. Members repeatedly hear anecdotal stories from businesses seeking to electrify that are experiencing difficulties in obtaining the additional capacity they require to do so. Evoenergy argue that these issues are often related to the capacity of individual connections and private electrical infrastructure rather than constraints within the shared network itself.

Regardless of the cause, this exchange highlights an important challenge. Electrification policy and network planning must proceed hand in hand. As more households, businesses and vehicle fleets move away from fossil fuels, governments must continue to scrutinise whether investment in network infrastructure is keeping pace with community expectations and our climate objectives. These are not questions for 2045; they are questions for today.

We need a clearer road map for managing the decline of the gas network. We need certainty about how the associated costs will be shared. Canberrans expect protections for vulnerable households. More importantly, they need confidence that the investment in the electricity network will respond to the needs of the transition.

If we get this transition right, we can reduce emissions, protect consumers and build a reliable, affordable energy system for future generations of Canberrans. That is the challenge before us, and it is one that this government must continue to confront with honesty, transparency and long-term planning.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.15): I rise to speak about the financial sustainability of ICON Water and the growing pressure that its infrastructure investment program will place on Canberra households over the coming years.

ICON Water will need to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in renewing ageing infrastructure, including major upgrades at the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre and across Canberra as the infrastructure is needed to augmented for densification. The question for the government is simple: how will these investments be funded?

ICON Water currently carries almost \$2 billion in debt, and interest expenses already exceed \$75 million a year, and major debt maturities will need to be refinanced over the next decade. At the same time, the utilities capital investment requirements continue to grow. The Assembly deserves transparency about the long-term plan, what the projected debt levels are over the next ten years, what proportion of future infrastructure spending will be funded through borrowing and what impact this will have on water and sewerage charges for Canberra families and businesses.

Canberrans expect reliable water services, but they also expect responsible financial management. The government must demonstrate that ICON Water's growing infrastructure program is sustainable and that future generations will not be left carrying an ever-increasing debt burden.

MR EMERSON(Kurrajong) (10.16 pm): As members know, ActewAGL is 50 per cent owned by Icon Water, which is, of course, 100 per cent owned by the ACT government. Governments are supposed to serve their citizens, yet I have now had countless Canberrans reach out to say they are tired of getting ripped off by their half-government-owned energy retailer, ActewAGL.

With Icon Water and Evoenergy appearing at estimates hearings, we were fortunate to have the acting head of ActewAGL Retail answer some of my questions about one of the areas in which this is occurring. If members have energy bills and have looked at them recently, you will notice there is an area that tells you that you are on the best plan that your retailer can offer you, and if you are not, they will let you know based on your usage that there is a better plan that you could be on instead. It is a good idea in concept, but what we heard—many people are already familiar with this—is that in fact even if your bill says you are on the best plan that ActewAGL can offer you, you might be able to get a better deal if you call them up and threaten to switch providers. You might be able to get a better deal depending on your individual circumstances.

During estimates hearings I asked ActewAGL about the grounds on which people can get better deals—what individual circumstances and how many people have made complaints about this process and the fact that the bills are misleading them into thinking they are on the best plan currently. Those questions were taken on notice. After having some time to think about it, Evoenergy then came back and said:

Evoenergy and ActewAGL Retail are separate entities. In accordance with its regulatory obligations, Evoenergy does not sell energy to customers. Evoenergy cannot answer questions about the operations of ActewAGL Retail or any other

retailer.

This was after being quite forthcoming during the hearings themselves. I found this incredibly disappointing from a retailer that is 50 per cent owned by the government. They had the opportunity to answer the questions and chose not to.

The estimates committee chased this up—I want to thank my colleagues for doing so—and ultimately recommended in our report that ActewAGL provide accurate information on customers’ bills regarding possible discounts and cheaper energy plans that may be available to customers based on their individual circumstances to ensure every customer is always on the best plan available for them. It seemed pretty reasonable.

The Speaker tabled a letter earlier this week from ActewAGL responding to this, where they have said:

We hope the additional information provided in this letter goes some way towards responding to the Committee’s recommendation ...

While it does do that to an extent, it does not actually accept the recommendation. It says:

... we go beyond the bill comparison to give customers more information and options to ensure they are on the best possible plan. We provide this opportunity to our Customers through multiple channels; including logging in to the ActewAGL App or My.ActewAGL at any time to review, compare and switch plans. For those who want tailored advice, our team can consider the details that matter, such as household size, appliances and when energy is used. For example, with the customer’s permission, we can use their smart meter data to work out whether a flat-rate or time-of-use tariff would deliver the best value for them, a level of guidance a bill or online comparison alone cannot provide. More information is also available at—

actewagl.com et cetera—

... and we have recently updated this in an effort to make this as simple as possible.

That is all great, but they do not include this information on the part of your bill that you get every month or quarter that says, “You are on the best plan we can offer you,” and they have not committed to doing that. They have also noted in their response:

It is also important to us that the Committee is assured ActewAGL complies with the Australian Energy Regulator (AER)’s Better Bills Guideline and the ACT Government Retail Electricity (Transparency and Comparability) Code Guideline.

I have done a bit of a Tara Cheyne-esque rabbit hole escapade on this one, so hopefully she will forgive me for taking up this time. Under that guideline there is a requirement regarding a positive deemed better offer message. This is what that panel is on your bill. It says it must contain the title using the exact words “Could you save money on another plan?” It must contain the exact words “Based on your past usage, you are on the best plan we can offer you”. This, of course, is if you are. It must contain the exact words “The Australian Energy Regulator requires us to include this information” and

must contain clear and simple instructions on how to compare other plans on Energy Made Easy. But only generally available plans are used in this comparison. As they pointed out in their response to the estimates committee, the information on your bill does not include restricted offers, which they have said are deliberately excluded from the process, and for good reason, as these are usually atypical customers and the risk of providing a general comparison may inadvertently provide incorrect assumptions and poor advice on the best plan.

ActewAGL points out in their letter that the Speaker tabled that restricted offers:

...only suit customers with a particular appliance and or infrastructure setup, usage profile or situation ...

What we mean by this is we offer plans tailored to how households actually consume energy and live, including dedicated plans for electric vehicle owners and customers with home batteries. These are exactly the kind of restricted offers described above in that they can deliver real value to the right customer but are not captured by the bill comparison ...

What ActewAGL has chosen not to say in their response to this recommendation is that in order to find a regulatory definition for “restricted offers” or “restricted plans”, which are plans that are excluded from the generally available plans captured by the best available offer message on your power bill, you have got to check the AER retail pricing information guidelines from April 2018, where among the list of types of restricted plans you will also find save plans, which are offered by retailers in response to a customer signalling they intend to switch to another retailer, and win-back plans, which are offered by retailers after the customer has switched to a new retailer to persuade the customer to return. This is really what I was asking about in the estimates hearing that I could not get an answer to. It turns out two of the ways you can get a better deal based on your individual circumstances are not to have solar panels or an electric vehicle or a home battery or any unique requirements, but to threaten to switch to another retailer or to initiate a switch to another retailer—in other words, if you are willing to haggle with your 50 per cent government-owned energy retailer, you can get a better deal than the “Best deal we can offer you” mentioned on your bill.

I accept there is a regulatory requirement for ActewAGL to tell customers on their bills whether or not they are on the best generally available plan, but the regulations do not limit what else could be included in the message. I implore ActewAGL to include even a sentence telling their customers that they may be able to get a better deal by calling up and asking for one. Even though the regulations require them to say, “You are on the best plan we can offer you,” if ActewAGL knows that may be untrue and that their customers might be able to get a better deal by calling up and asking for one, they should say as much; otherwise, you are just lying to your customers.

This is a problem for ActewAGL, which means it is a problem for Icon Water, which means it is a problem for the ACT government, and they should all do the right thing and be honest with their customers. With that said, it is also a problem with the federal laws around this, so I have written to the member for Fenner and Assistant Minister for Productivity, Competition, Charities and Treasury, the Honourable Dr Andrew Leigh MP about this asking whether this practice is a breach of consumer law, and if it is not, calling for the federal government to fix the law, update the regulations so energy

retailers are not encouraged to lie to us about whether or not the plan we are on is actually the best plan they can offer us.

People are stretched thin. During a cost-of-living crisis this does really matter, and I know I am hammering on about this, but the correspondence I am getting from people indicates that this does matter. We could sort it out. ActewAGL could sort it out at a minimum.

Unfortunately, Dr Leigh has passed my correspondence on to the minister for energy, and I am still awaiting a response to that, but in the meantime ActewAGL could do the right thing and stop lying to Canberrans on their energy bills. Even better, they could take steps to ensure all their customers are actually on the best, best plan ActewAGL can offer them rather than just telling them that they are even if they are not.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

ACT Gambling and Racing Commission—Part 1.19

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (10.25 pm): I would like to take the opportunity to make some comments on the Gambling and Racing Commission. I did want to especially talk about the very serious issue of gambling harm in the ACT community. We know this is a terrible scourge that touches many people's lives, and it is getting worse. The community's losses on poker machines in the ACT are not reducing, they are going up.

Minister Paterson has, of course, announced some changes to poker machine policies, and a central part of this commitment is to reduce pokie numbers from the current approximately 3,500 licences to 1,000 licences by 2045, some 20 years from now. The trajectory that the minister has outlined will require reductions of at least 500 machines every four years, so essentially we will continue to have thousands of poker machines still operating for many years to come while the numbers creep down. We already know that reducing machine numbers does not necessarily reduce gambling harm because spending just concentrates into the remaining machines.

ANU's new analysis predicts that in the ACT it is unlikely to see any reduction of harm from reduced numbers of pokies until they are reduced to at least 2,000—possibly even fewer—so that is 12 or possibly more years away before fewer numbers result in reduced harm, but that is not the main issue that we need to focus on now. What I wanted to point out now is as well as having in place effective government regulations and policies to reduce and minimise gambling harm it is also essential that the GRC is able to effectively administer and enforce these laws; otherwise, they will fail. This is a central finding of the very damning Auditor-General report tabled last year.

The Auditor-General's report on gaming machine licence regulations found that the GRC was failing in a variety of ways when it came to assessing noncompliance and enforcing obligations around licensees' obligations. These are serious failings. I understand that significant reforms have been and are still underway that will see the GRC remedy these, but I do want to put the government on notice that especially with the promised program for reform in the gambling space, it is critical that the GRC is properly empowered and properly resourced to do its job effectively; otherwise, we will

have these dead letter laws that are rendered meaningless through lack of enforcement.

Let me demonstrate this through an example. Another reform announced by Minister Paterson is the mandated breaks in play for people using poker machines. Mandated breaks in play are an important harm reduction measure. Unfortunately, the proposed approach will leave venues themselves to monitor and enforce these breaks in play. This is very problematic. The reform needs policing. Clubs historically have not been particularly good at compliance. We have seen very disturbing and tragic examples in the media recently. We have seen ACAT confirm this in a case of a patron where the Hellenic Club allowed her to withdraw more than the permitted \$200 by EFTPOS 45 times.

We have also seen that in the recent GRC audit of clubs' compliance with their community contribution obligations it found all 19 licensees it engaged with were noncompliant with various elements of the scheme's reporting requirements. We have also seen in the past the government-operated community contribution scheme that the Auditor-General said had weak oversight and a lack of clarity. In these circumstances we have had clubs claiming lots of dubious things as community contributions.

The proposed poker machine reforms of the government, putting aside the weaknesses in the actual policy, are subject to all kinds of vulnerabilities if they cannot be properly administered and enforced, yet looking at the budget papers for the 2026-27 budget, I see no material increase in the GRC's budget for the next four years—four years of essentially the same resources despite coming off a damning audit about the GRC's ability to properly monitor and enforce compliance and despite the upcoming implementation of what the minister has called the most significant reforms in Australia.

When an under-resourced agency struggles with monitoring compliance and struggles to have the resources to investigate and prosecute, they are going to be tested, especially when there are profits to be made from non-compliance. We all know the reputation of gambling entities when it comes to pushing the envelope in pursuit of profit. We cannot have laws on paper only.

Lastly, I wanted to mention for such a significant agency with a significant mandate the reporting budget accountability indicators are minimal—there are only two. One is about the GRC's public communication, and the other is about stakeholders finding it easy to interact with the GRC. Can I suggest a good additional indicator as a starting point would be about the levels of proactive compliance and enforcement work that the GRC completes.

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

Adjournment

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

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 10.32 pm.